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FILMING THE GAY NORMAL:  
AN EXPLORATION OF THE GAY CLOSET AND ITS PORTRAYAL IN FILM

by

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BA, University of New Hampshire, 1999

THESIS

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire  
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	v
CHAPTER.....	PAGE
INTRODUCTION.....	1
I.    The Ideal-Taboo Dichotomy.....	5
a.    Formal Culture: the Foundation of Taboo.....	6
b.    Informal and Technical Culture: The Reinforcement of Taboo.....	8
II.   The Game of Sexuality Make-Believe.....	12
a.    The Conflicted Miens of Heterosexual and Homosexual Love.....	13
b.    The Force of Speech in “Two Loves”.....	15
c.    Heterosexual Love’s Delusion.....	19
d.    The Complicitness of Homosexual Love with the Bind.....	21
III.  The Rules of the Game—The Closet.....	25
a.    Homophobia.....	28
b.    Internalized Homophobia.....	30
c.    The Closet.....	32
d.    Discreditable vs Discredited Status.....	34
IV. <i>Doña Herlinda y su Hijo</i> —The Evolution of the Bind.....	39
a.    Building the Bind.....	45
b.    Cinching the Bind.....	52
c.    The Die is Cast.....	55

V.	<i>Edge of Seventeen</i> —Fleeing the Bind.....	61
a.	Sexual Awakening.....	64
b.	Transformation.....	67
c.	Showdown.....	72
d.	Disintegration and Rebirth.....	77
VI.	<i>Juste une question d’amour</i> —Confronting the Bind, Changing the Rules.	83
a.	The Façade and the Shame.....	83
b.	The Reality.....	89
c.	The Bind Reinforced from Within and Without.....	91
d.	The Critical Encounter and the Evolution of the Double Bind.....	95
e.	The Double Bind.....	98
f.	The Showdown.....	100
g.	Shame and Destruction.....	104
h.	Staying.....	107
VII.	The Hidden Closet.....	113
	WORKS CITED.....	124

# ABSTRACT

## FILMING THE GAY NORMAL:

### AN EXPLORATION OF THE GAY CLOSET AND ITS PORTRAYAL IN FILM

by

Joseph A. Marquette III

University of New Hampshire, May, 2015

The purpose of this thesis is to flesh out an understanding of the lived experience of the homosexual closet and ultimately how it is portrayed in film. It uses film, however, as a snapshot of potential realities that reflect the gay individual in society.

It relies heavily on the social theories and work of Edward T. Hall, Erving Goffman, Albert E. Scheflen, Judith Butler, and Gerschen Kaufman, among others, to build a framework for understanding the closet on both a macro and micro scale. It does not attempt to isolate the homosexual but rather to situate him or her within a milieu where established cultural norms and key social constituents all play an active role in establishing the parameters that govern the gay closet and impose it upon the homosexual. Ultimately, it asks the question of how is the closet dismantled and the closet-promoting stigma removed.

Illustratively, it turns to the poem “Two Loves,” as well as the films *Doña Herlinda y su Hijo*, *Edge of Seventeen*, and *Juste un question d’amour*, as a means of rendering visible the complicated affective dynamics of the closet. The international nature of the selections aids in universalizing the dilemma of the closet such that it avoids being able to scapegoat the other; rather, it underscores the global reality of the closet as an abusive imposition of

heteronormativity with which human kind is grappling globally. In the end, it posits that the right to the pursuit of happiness is only checked via the closeting of all involved.

## Introduction:

Although the closeted homosexual *qua* homosexual is by very definition a socially isolated individual, the homosexual closet is by no means an isolated phenomenon; rather, it is a complex construction of social contracts rooted in the censorious nature of formal culture. This thesis will attempt to flesh out a detailed understanding of the various social forces that collaborate to create the conditions by which the homosexual closet is eventuated. Subsequently, it will explore how the closet is experienced, looking specifically at how it is managed and policed in order to control overt homosexual expression. It will explore themes of binding entrapment as well as rebellious escape and the possibility of eluding the bind. Conclusively, it will ask how the closet is dismantled, not as an elusive move simply to avoid the social realities of closeted existence, but in a bid to live liberated from the psychologically paralyzing nature of this prevaricatory and paracommunicatively reductive interpersonal bind.

In chapter I, “The Ideal-Taboo Dichotomy,” we will take an in-depth look at Edward T. Hall’s cultural model the Major Triad set forth in his work *The Silent Language*. We will examine the three layers of culture he sets forth: formal, informal, and technical, and analyze how they apply to the establishment of taboo generally and to the homosexual taboo specifically. We will consider formal culture as the point of origination and then also analyze the supportive roles of informal and technical culture. Special care will be applied to understanding how the tenants of the Major Triad are supported and how they are experienced affectively.

Having considered this stratified model for culture, we shall turn in chapter II, “The Game of Sexuality Make-Believe,” to Lord Alfred Douglas’ poem “Two Loves” and read it



carefully through the lens of the Major Triad. We will also consider the weight of language as agent, relying heavily on Judith Butler's *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* in order to understand the power and capacity of language to capture and limit the addressed. Moreover, we will begin to consider Albert E. Schefflen M.D.'s *Body Language and the Social Order: Communication as Behavioral Control* to better understand the working of the sociological bind and its acute role in the relegation of the homosexual to his or her place in the formal taboo structure.

In chapter III, "The Rules of the Game—The Closet," we consider carefully the role of psychological affect in the personal experience of the closet, relying heavily on the work of Gershen Kaufman *et al.* in *Coming Out of Shame: Transforming Gay and Lesbian Lives*. We shall look closely at the role of shame and its psychically paralyzing consequences for the one who experiences it acutely. In particular, we will consider the nature of homophobia as well as internalized homophobia. Special attention will be given to the role of contempt in the incitement of shame response and its devastating psychological effects.

Then we shall look at the nature of the homosexual closet itself, relying on Erving Goffman's *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Will consider the agencies of prevarication and dissimulation in the construction and maintenance of the closet, and then consider the two modes of existence *vis-à-vis* the closet, namely discreditable or discredited, i.e. the state of being in or out of the closet, and the special information and relationship management concerns that the two possible statuses entail.

In chapter IV, "*Doña Herinda y su Hijo*—The Evolution of the Bind," we shall consider the lived reality of the closet as bind. We shall look at the careful balance of impression

management as portrayed in this mid-80's portrayal of closeted romance in Guadalajara, Mexico. We shall consider the constricting layers of the bind, which constrain our protagonists to exist within an ever shrinking sphere of social mobility in order to maintain their closeted, discreditable status. We shall consider the heavy psychological weight they must bear in the form of relationship compromises in order to maintain their romance and coupled life while also maintaining the social veneer of heteronormativity. Constrained to silence and sneaked moments of intimacy, we shall witness the unfolding of the closet as prison.

In chapter V, "*Edge of Seventeen—Fleeing the Bind*," we shall consider an American Midwest scenario of the closet as untenable time bomb, a space of temporary safety that will give way to simultaneous loss and transformation. We shall consider the emergence of the discredited individual into a hostile social environment. He will be unable to maintain the exigencies for behavior established by the heterosexist hegemony and be forced to take shelter among the other discredited community members like him. There he will discover an opportunity to reinvent himself and adopt a new social persona more representative of his inner experience and more expressive of his emergent sexuality. Specifically we shall witness him exchange on milieu for another, experiencing freedom at the price of heavy, emotional suffering and loss. We shall witness the excitement of sexual awakening but also the crisis of the interpersonal showdown that will cut him off from his most cherished family relationships.

In chapter VI, "*Juste un question d'amour—Confronting the Bind, Changing the Rules*," we shall consider the tentacular and insidious capacity of the closet to create a stranglehold on self-expression. We shall the great extents to which one might go in order to maintain the illusion of the closet and stymie its dissolution. As in *Edge of Seventeen*, yet with even more piquancy, we shall see the deeply disruptive capacity of the critical encounter to upset the

tenuous balance of the closet and force the impossible scenario of the double bind in which there remains no possibility for obfuscation and avoidance. We shall witness the volatile capacity for violent personal disintegration eventuated through the entrapment of the self betwixt impossible choices. Conversely, we shall also witness the ever amazing human capacity for resilience in the face of adversity and the power of unwavering commitment to effect change within one's self and within those with whom we share the interpersonal bonds of love.

Finally, in chapter VII, "The Hidden Closet," we shall draw together our understanding of the closet as developed throughout this thesis. Then, we shall take one last look at the key players in the establishment of the closet and inquire if there is not another force behind the closet, namely, another closet. We shall consider how the formal taboo against homosexuality pits itself against the equally formal requirement that parents love their children with steadfast love. The ultimate goal of this paper is to set the gay child's closet within this frame, i.e. to ask if the closet does not by in large exist to shield the child as well as the parents from recognizing that parents do not, indeed, always love their children as much as they claim and that it is the threat of homophobic, conditional love that reinforces the gay closet so acutely.

## Chapter I: The Ideal-Taboo Dichotomy

If history and literature are in any manner a measure of human culture and character, then it is safe to posit that ideals and the striving for ideals are inherent to the human experience. The highlights of history, the protagonists of our tales, are the heroes who embody the courage, fortitude, wisdom, bearing, charisma, and even the beauty which constitute the best of mankind and which stand as goals for all to emulate. Ideals and the attainment of ideals are the pathway to honor, respectability, and achievement. They are, in short, our collective human *raison d'être*, and they fill our stories with promise of individual nobility and achievement and of the potential for self-actualization.

Interior to each ideal, however, is the shadow of the thing, the eventuality of its opposite, some sort of lack, which signifies shameful villainy or embarrassing defeat. Inherently subsequent to the positing of an ideal is the possibility of a counterbalancing taboo, and the two coexist in a sort of gambling mutuality, the former to be esteemed, the latter to be reviled. Together, ideal and taboo combine to form a cultural marker, a dichotomy of personal potential. They are balances of being and of action. Some are essential statements that measure the intrinsic value of a thing; others are choices that test the self. To live culturally, to quest, is to encounter these measuring sticks and bifurcations repeatedly and to stand or fall in the wake of the ontological crisis which they represent.

These ideal-taboo amalgamations are inextricable. The one constitutes the other in meaning, and yet they are not equal; the taboo proceeds from the ideal. In Eve Kosofsky

Sedgwick's work, *The Epistemology of the Closet*, we read in defense of her wrestling with the nature of these cultural dichotomies:

The analytic move it makes is to demonstrate that categories presented in a culture as symmetrical binary oppositions—heterosexual/homosexual, in this case—actually subsist in a more unsettled and dynamic tacit relation according to which, first, term B is not symmetrical with but subordinated to term A; but second the ontologically valorized term A actually depends for its meaning on the simultaneous subsumption and exclusion of term B (Sedgwick 9-10)

These cultural dichotomies constitute, in effect, an essential power struggle, not between two discreet selves, the one struggling for primacy over the other, but a struggle in which the ideal (term A) draws meaning from its perceived opposition to the taboo, or shamed element (term B), which it itself subdues and constitutes as a byproduct of its own claim to primacy. The interactive nature of the ideal-taboo dichotomy is a cultural game that constitutes the ideal *qua* ideal that then subsumes the taboo unto it. It is the goal of this chapter to attempt to outline the rules of this game.

#### Formal Culture: The Foundation of Taboo

Edward T. Hall, in his work *The Silent Language*, provides a framework for cultural understanding, which he labels the Major Triad, a system of cultural codification divided into three primary modes: formal, informal, and technical culture. He posits that these three building blocks of culture encompass, and establish the rules for, human interaction and cultural identity. Each is essentially different in form and function, and yet it is the ensemble of the three that constitutes a vital cultural experience and understanding.

Formal culture is essentially the power of yes and no; it is the force behind the construction of all cultural dichotomies. Formal culture establishes the rules of the game of cultural life in which there is a right and a wrong way to be and to behave. It is essentially authoritative, instilled by authority and maintained in like manner. It does not explain itself; it imposes itself, and it resists explanation. It is a top-down mode enculturated by the establishment of rules which are meant not to be questioned, or even, strictly speaking, to be understood, but rather to be followed.

Formal culture engenders a stabilizing effect on our communal life and is resistant to change. It relieves the cultural constituents from the burden of choice in that it establishes the way in which something ought to be done. It is the essential element in the notion of discipline, defining and ennobling all virtue. Likewise, it is the seat of moral judgment and the justification of condemnation.

Formal culture gives meaning to action in that it constitutes righteousness. It instills self-esteem insofar as it justifies and sanctifies the individual within a framework of codified appropriateness. It creates cohesion and security within a system of communal beliefs that affirm the individual at the heart of the establishment.

Contrariwise, formal culture is the fuel behind the force of moral shame. It underlines and informs law, politics, and religion. Inasmuch as it safeguards the moral right, it censures moral transgression. It is laden with affective potential, both positive and negative. Hall proffers:

Whenever violations of formal norms occur, they are accompanied by a tide of emotion. One can get an idea about how people feel about formal systems by thinking of a person who has been supported all his life by a very strong prop. Remove the prop and you shake the foundations of life. Deep emotions are

associated with the formal in almost every instance [...] In time, as formal systems become firmer they become so identified with the process of nature itself that alternative ways of behavior are thought of as unnatural—if not impossible (Hall 74-75).

Formal culture, then, is at the heart of the analysis of any morally centered ideal-taboo dichotomy, for it is, indeed, formal culture that establishes both sides as such. Formal culture empowers the dichotomy insofar as it affirms the achiever of the ideal and relegates the transgressor of the taboo.

The ideal-taboo dichotomy becomes a powerful mode of enculturation, which is heightened by the psychological tendency to blur the lines between the perception of the formal and the natural. Hall states, “It is formal culture that does a job closely analogous to instinct [...] It is the base from which the rest of culture springs and around which it is built” (Hall 78). Formal culture becomes, thus, the justification of culture itself. The mores of a people extend out of the formal core and reflect it. Cultural constituents come to experience this perceived reality as “the way life should be.” It is felt to be as natural as the migration of birds or the passing of seasons. Formal culture appears to imbue the moral life of a people with meaning; it is both the question and the answer.

#### Informal and Technical Culture: The Reinforcement of Taboo

In the maintenance of the ideal-taboo dichotomy informal culture plays a critical, if secondary, role. Informal culture is not so much spoken as it is observed. It is not taught in words but via role-modelling. One learns informal culture via observation. Indeed, informal culture can be so subtle as to resist language.

If a cultural aspect is beyond language or denied language, as in the case of a shameful taboo about which one dare not speak or which is seldom mentioned, informal learning may be the primary mode of understanding the subject in question. Hall suggests: “In the United States the most important area in which this type of [informal] learning operates is sex. For the most part, sex is learned informally—a fact which might account for the morbid fascination it exercises on people” (Hall 69-70). In a culture where puritanical indictment has tended to relegate conversation around sex to hushed tones, sneaked peaks, and illusive inferences, it is no wonder that sexuality is so easily fetishized. Formal culture is often silent concerning the matter; indeed, it uses silence as a means to mystify sexuality and keep it from the public forum. However, when it does speak, it is often more bent toward “thou shalt not” language as opposed to “thou shalt” which is to say that it tends to frame sexuality within the terms of taboo rather than the more celebratory language of ideal. In this case, the tendency has historically been a language more Biblical than experiential. The result is to enshroud sexuality within a pall of potential shame. The restricted speech around sexual ideal enables a highly controlled dialogue which limits the eventuality of a more fluid sexual understanding open to diverse interpretations. Taking the heterosexual-homosexual dichotomy as an example, the formal Judeo-Christian indictments against homosexuality, combined with an absence of observable cultural role models, serve to create deep silence and generate the concomitant morality shame which proves ineluctable. The force of taboo and the overt promise of punitive shame becomes the mode of ensuring a restrictive sexual ideal.

In a space where homophobic reaction to gay and lesbian people is culturally sanctioned, the lessons are easily communicated with little language. Firstly, absence and silence are powerful tools of formal instruction. The absence of gay role models and visible manifestations



of homosexual affection, in conjunction with the presence of the more readily available heterosexual counterpart, establish efficaciously the perceived normal or expected state of affairs, an effective application of the force of informal culture. Of course, visible manifestations of heterosexuality are circumscribed by unspoken informal degrees of required restraint; nonetheless, the permissibility of and even appreciation for appropriate, public manifestation of heterosexual affection against a backdrop of homosexual absence confirms in its approbation the rejection of homosexuality. Here heterosexuality is showcased while homosexuality is enshrouded by shameful absence and silence.

In this heteronormative scenario, when random manifestations of homosexual affection are actually encountered, they are often, in keeping with the mode of response to formal and informal transgression, met with visible reactions of disgust and contempt, which is socially redoubtable as to be lesson enough, and which is all that is needed to confirm the taboo:

There is little or no affect attached to informal behavior as long as things are going along nicely according to the unwritten or unstated rules. Anxiety, however, follows quickly when this tacit etiquette is breached. Extreme discomfort is apt to occur [...] What happens next depends upon the alternatives provided by the culture for handling anxiety. Ours includes withdrawal and anger (Hall 76).

If a young person observes an older authority figure respond with a look of contempt or disgusted shock to, say, a homosexual couple walking down the sidewalk holding hands or, perhaps, exchanging amorous glances over a slice of chocolate cake at a café, the informal communication informs that this is the correct manner in which to respond to such cultural infractions. No words need be exchanged, and indeed, a lack of words only confirms a heightened degree of repugnance and consequent shamefulness.

Technical culture, the mode of which is learner instruction with the goal of subject understanding, as opposed to the unquestioning obedience required by formal culture, serves to

maintain the ideal-taboo dichotomy insofar as it is useful in justifying the ideal and in corroborating the formal injunction. The three together, formal, informal and technical culture, bind cultural constituents into a network of expected norms whose maintenance serves to stabilize human society: “Taken at any given point, culture seems to be made up of formal behavioral patterns that constitute a *core* around which there are certain informal adaptations. The core is also supported by a series of technical props” (Hall 91).

To those who embody or achieve the formal ideals promoted by their culture, daily life holds a variety of rewards at the center of which are personal affirmation and social mobility. However, for the individual who falls within an essentially tabooed cultural category such as homosexuality within a fundamentalist Judeo-Christian wider culture, the same benefits are not enjoyed. Public mobility risks being significantly curtailed, and personal affirmation falls under the constant threat of psychically paralyzing stigmatization.

## Chapter II: The Game of Sexuality Make-Believe

Lord Alfred Douglas' quasi-Dantean poem "Two Loves" brings us intimately into the realm of romantic love in order to show us an image of strife that disturbs the otherwise paradisaical nature of this most besought human experience. There are two embodiments of love, Homosexual Love and Heterosexual Love; they walk together and constitute "the pale pageant that hath never an end" (38). Herewith, Douglas establishes the eternal, or the universally ontological, nature of what will be a vision of the pageantry, or interaction, between heterosexuality and homosexuality. The "two walking on a shining plain/ Of golden light" (40-41) recall Dante's encounter with Francesca and Paolo in Canto V of the *Inferno* which serves to couple them in an eternal fashion. However, contrary to Francesca and Paolo who coexist in hell united by a love still replete with affection and respect which is only marred by the Christian impermissibility of their adulterous union, in Douglas' poetic vision Heterosexual Love and Homosexual Love are bound together in a paradise, and yet they too are in a sort of interpersonal hell. In Douglas' poem we see the ideal-taboo dichotomy personified. Heterosexual Love and Homosexual Love coexist as love and in the place of love, yet between them is discord which is born of intolerance. The ensuing interaction between the poem's Dantean figure, which appears to be none other than Douglas himself, and the two loves exemplifies the nature of the heterosexual-homosexual ideal-taboo dichotomy and reveals the essence of the heterosexual-homosexual conflict.

## The Conflicted Miens of Heterosexual and Homosexual Love:

Heterosexual Love presents as “joyous [...] fair and blooming” (41-2), which paints him as unashamed and socially expansive. He sings of his love, which is to say that he encapsulates his love in language, affirming its existence socially, and he frames his speech in song, which is to celebrate it as an interpersonally exchangeable, comprehensible, and assumedly appreciable experience. Moreover, Heterosexual Love is adorned with roses (50). This particular flower endows Heterosexual Love with an air of accepted amorous normativity, a visible sign to affirm the speech act by which he self-defines as an expression of the love ideal: “He sang of pretty maids/And joyous love of comely girl and boy” (43-44). The formal permissibility of his song is reflected in his affective presentation:

His eyes were bright and ‘mid the dancing blades  
Of golden grass his feet did trip for joy.  
And in his hands he held an ivory lute,  
With strings of gold that were as maidens’ hair,  
And sang with voice as tuneful as a flute,  
And round his neck three chains of roses were (45-50).

The celebratory exuberance with which he presents leaves no doubt of his experience of self as acceptable. He exudes the self-esteem of one affirmed in his culture who believes in his own right to be, to be seen, and to be accepted. He trips for joy and makes music; he is ecstatic with the experience of himself. The unbroken chains of roses bestow eternal affirmation, and their number reflects a sense of completion.

Conversely, Homosexual Love presents as one beaten down. He is “full sad and sweet” (52); the latter reveals the truth of his nature, but the former betrays his social experience of self. He presents as mourning or, perhaps, depressed. He appears to be distant from himself, almost dissociated: “his large eyes/Were strange with wondrous brightness, staring wide/With gazing” (52-4). Contrary to Heterosexual Love who appears so very present in his experience of self, Homosexual Love’s gaze with no revealed object frames him more fully in a sort of vacuous emotional state. He does not sing; rather he sighs. He is bereft of both music and language; counterpoised to Heterosexual Love, he neither self-asserts nor celebrates the undisclosed self.

Douglas describes: “his cheeks were wan and white/Like pallid lilies, and his lips were red/Like poppies” (55-7). Again there is a contradiction. The color of his lips is bold with his nature, but the descriptor “wan” denotes a lack of vitality. The whiteness of his cheeks is like that of lilies, perhaps an implicit purity, and yet he is feeble. In revelatory fashion Douglas notes: “his hands he clenched tight/And yet again unclenched” (57-8). Here Heterosexual Love presents as anxiety laden; he reels under the experience of negative affect. His clenching, like his sighing, is repetitive. This, in conjunction with his wide-eyed gaze, presents a whole picture of alarm and unease like one who is not safe or who is experiencing trauma.

Contrary to the roses that adorn Heterosexual Love, Homosexual Love’s head is “wreathed with moon-flowers pale as lips of death” (59). Moonflowers, a pure white blossom that opens only at night, frame Homosexual Love both in purity and beauty yet also in shadow and secrecy. The comparison of his crown with the pale “lips of death” bereave it of its wick vitality and impose in lieu a sort of hopelessness; he is without distinctive future, without possibility of expanding or unfolding into life. He is already condemned even as he blooms.

The clear Christ image, however, opens another dialogue, one of martyrdom. The crown symbolizes an imposed mode, one that both affirms and shames inherent nobility.

Whereas Heterosexual Love, beautiful and joyful, is exuberant in the celebration of self, Homosexual Love, although also by all signs beautiful, presents as depressed, enfeebled, listless, and anxious. The two loves coexist in this paradisaical garden, yet their experience of space and of self is marked by sharp disparity. The question begs, of course, as to why, especially insofar as individual detail, although each recognizably possesses differing attributes, does not seem to demarcate one as essentially superior to the other such that the reader would suppose an innate inferiority of the one to the other and thereby an occasion and explanation for Homosexual Love's shame-ridden mien. Why then the marked difference of experience? When we return to poem, the answer comes in the ensuing interaction between the two loves and the interpersonal dysfunction that frames their relationship.

The Force of Speech in "Two Loves":

Confronted by the mystery of Homosexual Love's apparent misery, Douglas turns to the youth and addresses him affirmatively: "'Sweet youth/Tell me why, sad and sighing, though dost rove/These present realms? I pray thee speak me sooth/What is thy name?' He said, 'My name is Love.'" (63-6). Homosexual Love answers Douglas, and for the first time we see him be present in the moment. It is, indeed, Douglas' address that constitutes him in social space and quickens him from his aimless gaze. In Judith Butler's work *Excitable Speech* she offers, "[...] to be addressed is not merely to be recognized for what one already is, but to have the very term conferred by which the recognition of existence becomes possible. One comes to "exist" by

virtue of this fundamental dependency on the address of the Other. One “exists” not only by virtue of being recognized, but, in a prior sense, by being recognizable” (Butler 5). Douglas’ address provides the social space where Homosexual Love is able to affirm himself, for if being addressed, indeed, constitutes the individual in social time and space, the response to the address is the affirmation of the self: “The act of recognition becomes an act of constitution: the address animates the subject into existence” (Butler 25). Homosexual Love’s response is his affirmation and acceptance of the call into social space. Douglas’ words ask him to come alive socially.

Moreover, in asking his name, Douglas asks to engage him in relationship on this plane of social existence and to share in the responsibility of the power that comes through the force of naming. Homosexual Love is quickened by an invitation to relationship:

One is, as it were, brought into social location and time through being named [...] a subject in language is positioned as both addressed and addressing, and that the very possibility of naming another requires that one first be named [...] The jarring, even terrible, power of naming appears to recall this initial power of the name to inaugurate and sustain linguistic existence, to confer singularity in location and time (Butler 29).

Douglas’ address is one of complimentary affirmation; he first reveals what he recognizes in the youth. He turns to him and frames him, “Sweet youth” and “speak me sooth”. The address negates the powerlessness of Homosexual Love’s affective presentation. The words confer the strength and nobility that seem not to inform the apparently worthy self, and then Douglas asks for recognition in return and for an interpersonal sharing of speech together. Emboldened he asks, “What is your name?”

Fully constituted on this plane of social recognition and consequent existence, Homosexual Love speaks clearly and simply his truth, “My name is Love.” The self-affirmation is one of intrinsic social power; it imbues Homosexual Love with deep personhood, which for a

moment, casts the nature of his prior sullen presentation into question. Wherefore would one so outwardly stunning and so regally named present with such unmasked disillusionment? The shocking answer to the readers unavoidable inquiry echoes in the interpersonal drama which ensues.

“He lieth” (68) resounds with crashing imposition. “He lieth” halts all communication. Tierce, taut, and cutting, “He lieth” discredits profoundly, calls into question the very essence of the liar, constitutes the liar in the utterance. “He lieth” in response to an essential affirmation of the self, is perfect repudiation of the same. “He lieth” signifies “He is a liar,” for it comes in denial of the name itself. To say “My name is Love” is to say “I am holy;” to repudiate that name as lie is to frame the named in transgression; it is a biting paracommunicative reduction, socially stigmatizing and psychologically paralyzing.

“Then straight [Heterosexual Love] did turn himself to me/And cried, ‘He lieth’ ” (67-8). The refusal is instantaneous, total, visceral, and indignant. Homosexual Love cries out the accusation. He responds with profound emotion. This awful repudiation is anchored deep within the realm of formal culture. This is no personal response; rather it echoes immediately from the bowels of cultural taboo. Homosexual Love’s appropriation of the name Love incites Heterosexual Love to a fierce contempt. His cultural programming demands utter resistance: “[Think] of a person who has been supported all his life by a very strong prop. Remove the prop and you shake the foundations of life” (Hall 74).

At Homosexual Love’s assumption of the name Love, Heterosexual Love reels with contemptuous revulsion; he cries out, “He Lieth.” Even in the immediacy of his rage, Heterosexual Love refuses to address Homosexual Love who is reduced to “He” which is to say



“It.” It is a distancing and mystifying reduction. It removes Homosexual Love from the equation of communication; there is no union with *him*: “God is present when I confront You. But if I look away from You, I ignore him” (Buber 28). The effect is to deny him, i.e. Homosexual Love, *stead* within the social sphere. He is not, for he is no You.

The It may be appropriated for use, may be owned, may be named. One asks not It for Its name; one confers name upon It and in so doing overwhelms It, contains It, and frames It with the “jarring, even terrible, power of naming” (Butler 29). The third person denial of Homosexual Love’s self-affirmation as Love is a requirement for the restoration of formal cultural order which is disrupted when Douglas addresses Homosexual Love as “Thou,” which frees the latter from the exteriorly imposed order of formal culture: “This is part of the basic truth of the human world: only It can be put in order. Only as things cease to be our You and become our It do they become subject to coordination. The You knows no system of coordinates” (Buber 81). Douglas’ affirmative “Thou” liberates Homosexual Love in the social sphere to assume identity and, being freed from the formal cultural order which denies him *stead*, he quickens and proclaims his name as Love. Heterosexual Love’s formally fueled reaction strips Homosexual Love once again of the selfhood conferred by Douglas’ address. Only then can Heterosexual Love use the restrictive, paracommunicative power of naming to reestablish the force of formal cultural order and censure Homosexual Love’s affirmation. Heterosexual Love cries, “He lieth, for his name is Shame” (68). The appellation maims in the very saying. Homosexual Love is linguistically mutilated. He is not shamed; he is not shameful; he *is* Shame itself, which is to say he is the very opposite of the Love he claims to be.

Framed in shame, Homosexual Love becomes socially the very essence of the unspeakable. He is pariah. He is dismembered from himself in language, unable to assume

himself in communion with others; he is estranged from self. Moreover, the force by which he is named Shame acts upon him; it overwhelms him and confines him. In his explanation of paracommunicative reduction, Schefflen posits: “The use of a particular variant or deviant performance is thought of as a regular trait of the person who performs it. This trait comes to be considered the thing that characterizes the person, to the exclusion of his other traits. To say someone *is* disgusting, for example, implies that his is *only* disgusting and *always* disgusting” (Schefflen 164). Thus, Heterosexual Love’s assertion, “his name is Shame,” is one of significant social restriction, which relegates, and even equates, Homosexual Love with the very core of taboo. The appellation comes with the full thrust of formally punitive force and explains clearly Homosexual Love’s hitherto inexplicably depressed presentation. His apparent incapacity to celebrate his beauty is definitively linked to his social exchange with Heterosexual Love who so forcefully frames Homosexual Love within a guise of unacceptability. Nevertheless, the reader is still left unclear as to the reason for the imposed social reduction. What is the motive for which Heterosexual Love attacks Homosexual Love so vehemently?

#### Heterosexual Love’s Delusion:

In affirmation of his repudiation of Homosexual Love, Heterosexual Love asserts, “ ‘But I am Love’ ” (69). Immediately the stage is set to reveal some sort of confusion. The claim is made by both for the same title and honor. Resolution is uncertain. They both possess, if only by virtue of physical appearance, a claim to the beauty that would seem befits a being who self-asserts as Love. Moreover, they both present as possessing the requisite grace and ethereal nature which such a claim would demand in poetry and song. They both reside on this

paradisical plane which the reader accepts easily enough as the realm of Love. What then is the cause to the interpersonal angst between them?

The first hint to the cause of the strife between the two Loves lies in Heterosexual Love's statement of self-affirmation, i.e. "But." But is a negating conjunction; it refutes the former in favor of the latter. It does not share space; it eliminates the one and confirms the other. "His name is Shame/But I am Love" leaves no room in language, at least, for there to be more than one Love, yet there is no immediately apparent, environmental justification in this Love realm for Heterosexual Love's assertion, which might corroborate his primacy or even ratify his claim. Indeed, the very presence of both beings in this realm of Love appears to deny Heterosexual Love's claim as does the nature of the environment whose idyllic essence seems ill suited to anything but love. Hence, the real presence of both appears to affirm both, privileging neither one nor the other. What then lies at the heart of Heterosexual Love's visceral refusal of Homosexual Love?

" 'But I am Love,' " Heterosexual Love insists and then explains, " 'and I was wont to be/Alone in this fair garden, till he came/Unasked by night' " (69-71). In what amounts to little more than an outstanding expression of selfishness and self-centeredness, Heterosexual Love affirms that, in the end, he simply does not wish to share the honors of this paradise; he wishes to be the only Love in the "fair garden" of Love, yet this seems trite. An assertion of "I don't want to play" seems too weak to eventuate an environment so thick with signs of interpersonal dysfunction. The motivations do not seem sufficient to the ostracizing deed. What, then, is the force behind the selfishness powerful enough to create a mood of shame in this otherwise blissful space? The answer lies in another paracommunicative reduction.

“ ‘I am true love’ ” (71). Availing ourselves of Schefflen’s formula, Heterosexual love is “*only*” true love and “*always*” true love. The appropriation of the descriptor “true” is to say, then, “real.” Heterosexual Love’s claim on Love is that he is love and there is none other. There is no room for Homosexual Love within this definition, the tone of which invokes the power of formal culture’s capacity to define what is and, therefore, to define what is not. He further clarifies, “ ‘I fill/The hearts of boy and girl with mutual flame’ ” (71-2). The definition of true love is then heterosexual love. It is always the only real love. The formal weight of such a belief bears with it significant cultural ramifications. Within the parameters of such an assertion there can be no other claims to the title. In order to be the one true love, all other loves are inadmissible. The force of the affirmation carries with it the concomitant denial of the legitimacy of all possible loves, which are thereby rendered impossible. They are reduced to illegitimacy and prevarication.

#### The Complicitness of Homosexual Love with the Bind:

The difficulty arises, of course, in that Heterosexual Love is simply not the only Love in the fair garden. Homosexual Love coexists with Heterosexual Love, and he exists *qua* Love. Indeed, it appears that they exist as Love together, and it is this togetherness that further complicates Heterosexual Love’s brazen assertion or, perhaps, underpins it. The very claim of Heterosexual Love as the love that fills “The hearts of boy and girl with mutual flame” binds him in counterpoised relationship to Homosexual Love whose existence he affirms in the denial. The conflict arises via Heterosexual Love’s claim to being true love, which by linguistic force reduces Homosexual Love to naught but an ersatz impostor.

The two as Love in the realm of Love exist in relationship; the rift originates in Heterosexual Love's grand But which refuses to acknowledge the legitimacy of Homosexual Love's claim to selfhood. Indeed, it is this refusal that cements the dysfunction in their relationship, creating of their coexistence a Schefflenesque "gruesome twosome" or perverse symbiotic relationship in which neither is free to be fully himself: "The term 'gruesome twosome' (Bacon 1960; Schefflen 1960) describes two people who cannot leave each other or relate to third parties. Each member tends to become infantile in such a lock" (Schefflen 175). Homosexual Love finds himself overbonded to Heterosexual Love in a reduced fashion. The latter is full of vaunt and angry arrogance; the latter physically presents as powerless:

When a person is not overbonded to his family or to some other institution, he simply leaves if the situation turns to his disadvantage. When he is overbonded, however, he can readily be made powerless by a limitation in his mobility and become defenseless against scapegoating.

He then falls into a vicious cycle. [...] He is likely to become guilty and self-effacing and thus more subject to scapegoating. When he reaches the point where he can neither leave nor maintain a progression to greater rewards, we will say that his is "bound" (Schefflen 171).

Homosexual Love is bound. As Love, he has no choice but to persist in the realm of Love, yet Heterosexual Love's negation of his legitimacy renders him unable to affirm himself as Love. He is shamed and manifests the expected signs of the shameful.

The confirmation of the bind is seen most lucidly when Douglas addresses Homosexual Love in an affirming tone, which, if there be truth in the positive affirmation, risks the undermining of the dysfunctional symbiosis extant between the two loves. Against Homosexual Love's self-affirmation to Douglas, Heterosexual Love quickly intervenes to reestablish situation definition and reassert his own primacy and, subsequently, Homosexual Love's illegitimacy.

Nevertheless, a preponderant element in the symbiosis between the two loves is yet unresolved, namely, that Homosexual Love exists *qua* Love, and as Love he has a right to the realm of Love and to the legitimacy of his name. Thus, then, there is an element of submission in the relationship between the two loves; i.e. Homosexual Love submits to the bind:

An important difference between the antisocial adaptation to immobility and the overdependent (or neurotic) adaptation seems to be whether or not the deviant accepts the scapegoating and explanations for his problem. [...] in varying degrees the neurotic person *accepts* the blame for his situation. This locks him into the bind. Binding is not possible without the psychological agreement of the immobilize person (Schefflen 175).

It is only insofar as Homosexual Love submits to the shaming projection that the shame becomes real or, at least, experienced as legitimate. Homosexual Love, being in every virtue Love and the apparent equal of Heterosexual Love, cedes place to the demands of Heterosexual Love to feign be the only true expression of Love: “Then sighing said the other, ‘Have thy will’ ” (73). The concession is to relinquish self-determination. He relinquishes his power, and in so doing concretizes the force of the bind. Homosexual Love submits to the shaming force and assumes the silence of the shamed which, although incapable of altering his essential being, commits him to role in relationship to Heterosexual Love, and with a sigh he utters his own condemnation: “I am the Love that dare not speak its name” (74).

Thus, the bind is complete. Homosexual Love is silenced. The ideal-taboo dichotomy is solidified. Heterosexual Love assumes the full authority of formal culture and therewith the sole claim to legitimacy as the one expression of true love. Homosexual Love is relegated to shameful silence and relinquishes the authority of self-determination. His mobility is severely compromised; far from exiled, he will persist in the shadow of Heterosexual Love’s self-assertion. The homosexual closet is, effectively, birthed in the wake of the discriminating But of

Heterosexual Love's refusal to recognize the legitimacy of Homosexual Love's claim to the title and of the latter's submission to the paralyzing shame of the essential silence of one who dare not speak his name.

### Chapter III: The Rules of the Game—The Closet

Judeo-Christian culture frames sexuality within shame, particularly via the force of religious taboo. Sex is portrayed as a gateway to sinfulness and must be controlled if it is not to lead to morality failure. However, in so far as sexuality is fundamental to the human experience, there is the need for it to be redeemed from this lens of shamefulness as an experience available to the population majority who will inevitably take part in it. In Western society, as in many civilizations across the globe, marriage serves as the sanctifying institution whereby sexuality is enjoyed without the culturally indoctrinated shame script which otherwise creates a barrier. In their work, *Coming Out of Shame: Transforming Gay and Lesbian Lives*, Kaufman *et al.* offer:

In many cultures the sexual drive is a primary target of shaming, causing sex to become bound by shame. Because shame is spontaneously triggered either by sexual acts, sexual feelings or sexual thoughts, images, and fantasies, this particular shame bind results in the inhibition or disruption of sexuality.

Through the creation of these specific or multiple shame binds, shame exercises a powerful, indirect control over behavior, eventually constricting personality (59).

The homosexual bound by religious shame concerning sexuality is vulnerable to intense psychological suffering insofar as the very experience of sexuality, in any form, becomes a trigger for the affective experience of being unworthy and socially unacceptable. Instead of representing a pleasure to be discovered and about which even to be excited, sexual awakening and subsequent encounters with sexual stimuli, romantic interests, fantasies, and the like, become an immediate threat of psychic discomfort.

In the twenty-first century where, in the Western world at least, secularism is becoming more and more prominent, the threat of religious shaming is diminished to varying extents



depending on individual demographic and personal encounter. However, this does not alleviate the threat of sexuality shame completely insofar as secular culture continues to cleave to notions of heteronormativity, or heterosexism, whose black and white framework provides a potent tool for the shaming of perceived deviancy from the norm:

Heterosexism can be defined as the widespread cultural assumption that all people actually are or would want to be heterosexual. [...] Heterosexism is a profound source of shame for lesbians and gay men, and it functions to shame anyone who is different and to silence lesbians and gay men in many situations where their heterosexuality is assumed (Kaufman 95).

Heterosexism is a key element in the institutionalization of the homosexual closet. It is, indeed, an assumption, both interpersonal and intrapersonal, which locks individuals into sexuality roles *de facto*. It creates an encounter framework in which each individual is presumed to be heterosexual, following a sort of “innocent until proven guilty” motif, which obliges the non-heterosexual to experience sexuality shame in a wide variety of otherwise unrelated social encounters. Certainly, within a social space where heterosexism is the rule, the simplest exchanges chance the threatening of sexuality shame, which risks rendering basic socialization laborious and stressful, even extremely so.

These two sources of essential shame, religion and heterosexism, are part of our earliest socialization: “Shame about men loving men and women loving women is communicated directly through the family” (Kaufman 86). Religious injunction against homosexuality is primarily an expression of formal culture. It is presented via precept as if the standpoint were fact. This paracommunicative presentation suggests that there is no other way to understand the matter; it is sinful, and renders the homosexual worthy of judgment: “Judgments about what is acceptable or unacceptable become indictments and eventually internalized as rules governing

behavior to ward off shame” (Kaufman 86). Religious injunction against homosexuality is a formal expression of heterosexism.

Heterosexism, however, works significantly as an informal force. It is frequently unvoiced and yet imposingly ubiquitous. It is observed. It is the metamessage in fabulous romance and all expressions of “boy gets the girl” entertainment; it is presented simply as the way life should be, as the basic goal and recipe for happiness: consensual, stable, devoted heterosexual union, i.e. marriage. Framing informal culture, Kaufman proffers, “We learn from what we are shown, from what we actually observe. But we also learn from what we do not see” (94). Thus, it is not only the omnipresence of heterosexual signs but also the relative absence of homosexual images and role models which creates a silence concerning homosexuality, which is inevitably shameful: “Silence breeds shame every bit as much as shame breeds further silence. The two are locked in an endless cycle of mutual reactivation. Silence first of all communicates shame because whenever there is a subject that cannot be spoken about openly, we invariably feel shame” (Kaufman 103). Especially for children do silence and omission with regards to homosexuality represent impediments to the development of a healthy understanding of self and others: “Childhood is not inherently more shameful than subsequent stages of life, but it is a time when our capacity to both tolerate shame and overcome its sources are most limited” (Kaufman 56). It is this vulnerability to misinterpret, or even not to notice, silence that threatens: “A child who asks about a forbidden topic like sexuality and is greeted with silence learns not to trespass on that subject again” (Kaufman 104). Informal culture triggers and is triggered by assumptions concerning the observed; with a general paucity of homosexual role models available to children, they will, as a matter of course, grow up with a sense of shame surrounding it, the silence itself creating the shame.

## Homophobia:

This cyclical nature of shame and silence concerning homosexuality leads directly to what is commonly referred to as homophobia, a misnomer which reduces homophobia to a fear reaction. However, homophobia is a complex affect response with a strong potential for violent manifestation:

Homophobia is not simply fear, but a complex of affects that certainly often includes fear, as well as shame, disgust, and contempt for any sign of masculine inferiority. The consequences are revulsion, hatred, and vicious contempt toward anyone who is gay or merely perceived to be gay. That same loathing is turned inward against the self if a man is gay but unable to accept his sexual orientation (Kaufman 73).

Far from being a simple phobic reaction, homophobia is an anticontamination script; “its purpose is to quarantine the contaminant in order to preserve the pure” (Kaufman 98). Disgust and dissmell, an inherent element in the affect compound contempt, are natural psychological adaptations to preserve us from contaminants: “Because dissmell forever distances the impure in our midst, dissmell is the guardian of purity” (Kaufman 91). When triggered, disgust and dissmell evoke revulsion. When the perceived contaminant is a human being, that person becomes the object of revulsion. To be the object of revulsion is deeply shaming. Children and young people especially are vulnerable to piquant shame when targeted by revulsion; it is a terrifying scenario. To experience contempt towards another human being is to feel revulsion for that person, to be repulsed by him. The homosexual, who meets with contempt, be it on the part of peers and community members or even family, feels himself or herself to be in that moment profoundly undesirable and essentially unacceptable. The shame is immediate and total, and the effect is psychically paralyzing. Reactions to being the object of contempt vary depending on the individual and the scenario, but it is inevitably powerful. Physical and psychological dissociation, turning inward in an attempt to disappear from view, spontaneous flight, as well as

stunning rage are all possible reactions to feeling the overwhelming force of shame that follows in the wake of contemptuous homophobia.

Formal culture reinforces the contempt felt toward the perceived contaminant, and strengthens it with the conviction of moral correctness:

Most people consider their standards and the standards of the institution they belong to as correct, healthy, normal, and superior. A negative judgment about a member, therefore, carries the implication that he is incorrect, unhealthy, abnormal, or inferior. Thus, certain traits or mannerisms may be seen as deviancies rather than as differences in orientation, role, experience, or ethnic background (Schefflen 164)

To be seen as different is inherently shaming, but to be seen as deviant is profoundly debasing. That which is deviant is perceived as meritorious of seething censure; it is intolerable and even worthy of eradication. The deviant is thought to deserve the contempt received from perceived normals. They are not the objects of pity, rather of scorn, a form of rejection seasoned with contempt.

Furthermore, when the scorned individual reacts with shame, it is assumed a fitting response; convinced that the deviant is worthy of rejection, and having reduced the deviant paracommunicatively as being nothing more than a manifestation of his perceived deviancy, cultural constituents belonging to the sanctioned faction feel justified in their contempt. His shame is accepted as the natural result of, and part and parcel to, being a deviant,: “[...] we may perceive his defensive response to his situation as a direct expression of his defect, and then see both defect and response as just retribution for something he or his parents or his tribe did, and hence a justification of the way we treat him” (Goffman 6). The recipe reads: the deviant feels shame when we shame him because he is shameful. The scornful individual, perceiving himself as being thoroughly justified in his attitude toward the deviant, is safeguarded thus from any experience of shame on his part for being intolerant.

Thus, the homophobe responds with vehement contempt to the homosexual, reducing him or her paracommunicatively to the status of undesirable. Rejection of gay and lesbian people is justified on formal grounds, relieving the homophobe of any experience of guilt for what is perceived to be a righteous stance. This formal insulation buffers the institution with a sort of infallibility statement. Rejection is the only course.

#### Internalized Homophobia:

Insofar as the homophobic script is learned before the individual is aware of his or her own homosexuality, the recognition of one's self as homosexual immediately triggers a contemptuous shame response aimed at one's very self. The self stands in judgment and condemnation over the self, splitting self from self: "Such an individual has thoroughly learned about the normal and the stigmatized long before he must see himself as deficient. Presumably he will have a special problem in reidentifying himself, and a special likelihood of developing disapproval of self" (Goffman 34). Here the individual develops an internalized homophobic script, generating an inner life of self-contempt.

The homosexual individual with an internalized homophobic script condemns himself via the precepts of the wider society. His own superegoic voice, wielding the force of formal injunction, rails against him internally and becomes a source of perpetual condemnation. Insofar as the corroborating force is formal culture, the condemnation is perceived as just and even as a natural reaction to the contaminant homosexuality, which magnifies the experience of shame: "Shame is self-validating because in the moment of shame we believe we deserve to feel so bad" (Kaufman 39).

If the internalized homophobic script is not altered, self-loathing, born of contempt aimed inwards, comes to dominate the inner dialogue, and the maintenance of healthy self-esteem becomes impossible. The daily experience of self as undesirable creates a psychological environment of shame that saturates the experience of self until homophobia completely frames the perception of one's person:

The developmental progression from self-shaming scripts through the process of disowning finally culminates in the formation of a shame-based identity. The shame-based gay man or lesbian could easily echo the Duke of Bourbon in Shakespeare's *Henry V*, who cries out when the French are defeated at the Battle of Agincourt, 'Shame, and eternal shame, nothing but shame!' Now gay identity is permanently riddled with shame, existing in a state of perpetual inner strife waged against the enemy within. A shame-based identity is a true source of what has been referred to as internalized homophobia: self-hatred (Kaufman 147-148).

If unmitigated, an internalized homophobic script is psychically maiming; it censures the self essentially and condemns it totally. The constant direction of homophobic contempt within one's own psyche establishes an environment of self repulsed by self; one experiences revulsion towards one's being. The contempt is paralyzing: "Contempt directed outward lynches others, but contempt directed inward lynches self" (Kaufman 99).

Homophobia is thus a force working on two fronts. It comes from without, but also from within. It is birthed and reinforced by formal culture as well as informal culture. It is an anticontamination script which manifests as powerful contempt against the homosexual individual. It is acutely threatening, providing a basis for spiritual, psychological, and even physical violence. The impulse is to hide, to escape, and thus provides the necessary framework for the establishment of the closet.

## The Closet:

The homosexual closet is essentially a dramaturgical construction for the purpose of impression management. External homophobia demands closeted behavior in refusing a space for the homosexual to exist safely *qua* homosexual. In this environment, the gay person may develop any number of coping mechanisms to support the need to avoid notice, i.e. to pass. The conditions for the closet originate outside of the individual and are imposed; the closet itself is an adaptation of the individual to pass within what is perceived to be a hostile environment. The closet, which begins as a measure of self-defense, is by nature insidious and pervasive, and ultimately becomes a trap from which one may or may not escape.

Essential to the closet is the assumption that one's self is unspeakable, which is to say essentially shameful; consequently one presents one's self as being what one is not, which evidently precludes the possibility of publicly affirming one's self. One is effectively thus denied the experience of social existence as a self-affirmed individual affirmed by others. This silence surrounding the self inevitably leads to shame: "Being in the closet means being in the closet of shame, still in hiding, cloaked in secrecy" (Kaufman 104).

The need for secrecy, for not being discovered, which is fundamental to the closet, leads to prevarication. The ubiquitousness of sexuality in the social realm is not easily avoided. As they are frequently set within a heteronormative framework, seemingly innocent questions on the part of a peer or family member concerning romance or romantic interests become dangerous courses to slalom, ambushing the closeted gay individual in the moment of utterance, and lies ensue, lies to catalogue away, lies to maintain, lies to embellish as a further smokescreen; entire biographies are invented to put off prying curiosity and perhaps win some momentarily

pleasurable, if inherently baseless, affirmation. Attractions are feigned; mendacious commitments are used as diversions. The closet swiftly becomes a maze of outright mendacity and slippery contortions and omissions of truth, yet these lies prove obligatory if the homosexual individual is to remain within the good graces of a heterosexist society: “Gay men know a lot about lying. We have been lied to and lied about. We have been subtly encouraged to lie, asked outright to lie, and forced to lie against our will. We have been told that we were lying when we were telling the truth. We have been told that we were telling the truth when we were lying” (Rofes 127).

Mendacity, of course, creates a second snare, for falsehood is also gravely taboo. The gay individual ultimately falls into a catch-22, whereby if he lies, and thus behaves dishonorably, he is perceived as honorable, the benefits of which he might enjoy but not the peace, yet if he speaks the truth, he is perceived as dishonorable, and yet he has behaved honorably, enjoying neither peace nor benefit. Thus, the closet is a double-edged sword of shame for it affirms the self as unspeakable and forces the individual to lie unspeakably, which is to say essentially. The closet is not only shameful; it is exhausting and a source of constant fear: “The principle effects of shame on the self are hiding, paralysis, and a feeling of being transparent [...] Shame therefore leaves us perpetually feeling like impostors, waiting to be found out and unmasked” (Kaufman 38-39).

The pressures of the closet and its daily maintenance lead to the adoption of various defensive scripts which shield from the ever looming gaze of social scrutiny. They largely relieve the weight of focus directed at the source of shame, in this instance homosexuality, and create a diversion which is designed to occupy the attention of those with whom one interacts and permit the question of sexuality to go unnoticed, evading the concomitant shame. Kaufman



et al. isolate eight such scripts: rage, contempt, striving for perfection, striving for power, transfer of blame, internal withdrawal, humor, and denial (Kaufman 63). Although several of these scripts are not without their own inherent shame, the impact of sexuality shame is so potent that these diversions rise preferable to the alternative and do much to maintain and, at times, embellish the closet.

In or Out? Discreditable vs. Discredited status:

Ultimately, one is in or out of the closet, although, of course, it is possible to be both especially if one is skilled in impression management and able to compartmentalize one's social spheres. Nevertheless, social dynamics demand that one be one or the other in any given social encounter, and this difference will strongly influence the stigmatized individual's experience of self and other:

The term stigma and its synonyms conceal a double perspective: does the stigmatized individual assume his differentness is known about already or is evident on the spot, or does he assume it is neither known about by those present nor immediately perceivable by them? In the first case one deals with the plight of the *discredited*, in the second with that of the *discreditable*" (Goffman 4).

The closet belongs to the discreditable as does the shame which accompanies it. The discredited publicly bear the force of stigmatizing shame, yet free from the closet, benefit from what may at least feel like more numerous options for mobility.

The closet begins with the first instance of denial or omission of truth designed to avert attention from stigma, for it is here that the work of passing begins. The closeted individual's primary social need is to maintain the appearance of heterosexuality or even to mute the question

of sexuality altogether. Several defensive scripts may be adopted to aid in deflecting the pressure of maintaining the closet, all to avoid the threat of being outed.

The closeted individual, who belongs to a family which espouses a homophobic script, is often unsafe on all fronts, and the pressure to maintain appearances can prove monumental:

When one moves from a consideration of a discredited person to discreditable ones, much additional evidence is found that the individual's intimates as well as his strangers will be put off by his stigma. For one thing, the individual's intimates can become just the persons from whom he is most concerned with concealing something shameful; the situation of homosexuals provides an illustration [...]" (Goffman 54).

The threat of familial rejection, insofar as the family constitutes such a critical base for social security, is particularly terrifying. Parental approval, which is to say the health of our first interpersonal relationship, is fundamental to the experience of self-esteem. To be deprived of parental approval is to suffer powerful shame.

The closet, then, is a bind that keeps the discreditable homosexual vitally connected to the heterosexist world at least in appearance. The closeted individual may attempt at all risks to maintain the closet so to avoid facing the shame of being discredited. However, as he or she nears years where courtship is typical, or even expected, behavior, it may become more and more difficult to maintain the illusion of the closet.

If a closeted homosexual's closet is threatened directly such that it cannot be maintained, the result can be devastating for his or her social stability: "When a person is bound he lives in a restricting social niche buffered by rationalizations. If this tenuous structure of adaptation is then attacked and condemned the person can be said to be 'double-bound' " (Schefflen 184). The shame-based identity is a double-bound identity, because the gay person who suffers from the

perpetual pressures of internalized homophobia cannot avoid being seen by his own self, who calls his own bluff at every turn.

Moreover, the bound and double-bound individual is vulnerable from outside assault. The attack may come in the form of a showdown that forces the issue, directly addressing it, and not leaving room for tactful avoidance. In the case of the bound, or double-bound, closeted homosexual, the otherwise felicitous meeting of a potential partner can be outstandingly disrupting: “The double-bind relationship is an unstable and volatile structure. Some unexpected critical interaction may undercut the bound person’s vulnerable system of rationalizations or threaten to annihilate his tenuous social space” (Scheflen 187). When a bound individual is forced to break the bind, the act risks profound emotion and strong formal upheaval. If the closeted individual is accosted with an anticontamination script in the moment of coming out, the added potential for rage and violence is markedly increased, insofar as contempt is itself a violent script. Kaufman asserts, “When you think of contempt for yourself or others, picture a lynching” (Kaufman 65). However, the violence of contempt is not necessarily a one-way street, and the scorned individual, reacting viscerally to the perceived contempt, may also respond with rage or violence. Scheflen writes, “I think the expression of contempt is the straw that breaks the camel’s back” (194).

On the other hand, the individual may flee the situation entirely and refuse to engage even to the extent of abandoning social structures and familiar comforts. In the case of homosexuals, gay ghettos have served for decades as harbors for those who flee the restrictions of heterosexist communities where they enjoy no apparent opportunity to live openly and fully. In these communities, they are able to encounter like others who share similar experiences and who have also escaped from their closet:

The first set of sympathetic others is of course those who share his stigma. Knowing from their own experience what it is like to have this particular stigma, some of them can provide the individual with instruction in the tricks of the trade and with a circle of lament to which he can withdraw for moral support and for the comfort of feeling at home, at ease, accepted as a person who really is like any other normal person (Goffman 20).

This latter scenario provides a possibility for community and stability to replace that lost in the breakup of the familial and community structures upon which one depends before the dissolution of the bind.

The closet, then, is a dramaturgical structure based in the obfuscation of truth and the use of outright mendacity in order to shield the homosexual from the censure of homophobic community. It is supported via defensive scripts which divert the probing gazes of social monitors and help to relieve the stress of impression management. As long as the defensive scripts hold, the individual is able to persist within the illusion and maintain appearances. It is, however, an extremely unstable adaptation, vulnerable from without and within. If the closeted individual is confronted contemptuously reactions may range from flight to explosive violence. Above all, however, the closet is the adaptation to a preexisting formal injunction against homosexuality, which is soundly buoyed by religious precept and the ubiquitousness of heterosexism. These important social forces surround homosexuality with silence and shame and render it taboo, for “Shame is the affect from which all stigmas and taboos spring” (Kaufman 85). The rules of the closet are silence and dissimulation; the price for breaking the rules, whether actual or imagined, is contemptuous rejection.

Nevertheless, the bind of the closet can be broken, for it depends on the complicity of the bound individual to assent to the righteousness of the anti-homosexual formal injunction. Whether submissive or shameless, whether fleeing the scene or exploding with rage, so long as

the fundamental correctness of the homosexual taboo stands unchallenged it wields the trump card of shame over every individual involved, victim or enforcer, homosexual and heterosexual alike. The tables are turned, however, if the rules are changed.

#### Chapter IV: *Doña Herlinda y su Hijo*—The Evolution of the Bind

The 1985 film *Doña Herlinda y su Hijo* by Jaime Humberto Hermosillo situates us in 1980's Guadalajara, Mexico. At the center of our story is the homosexual couple Rodolfo, played by Marco Antonio Treviño, a pediatric surgeon whose strong overbonding to his mother dominates his life choices, and Ramón, Arturo Meza, a music student at the local university, whose apparent love for Rodolfo will bind him into the role of kept lover. Surrounding them is Doña Herlinda, played by Guadalupe del Toro, Rodolfo's mother, whose strong attachment to her son will direct the course of the film and the lives of our characters. She is at once the orchestrator of the bind and unadmittedly wise to her son's homosexuality and his attachment to Ramón. The fourth primary personage is Olga, played by Leticia Lupercio, who will be the wifely public face of Rodolfo's heterosexual charade.

The film begins with an extreme long shot of downtown Guadalajara. In the center of the frame, there is a cupola of an apparent municipal building and reaching over this into the top of the frame are the twin steeples of a church topped with matching crosses. The buildings are imposing and fill the frame. They evoke authority, tradition, and stability, setting an immediate tone for the backdrop against which the action of the film will play out.

In the foreground there is a park and metro station from which Rodolfo emerges. The camera slowly zooms onto him in a full shot on quarter turn, which sets him as the focus of our attention. He is clean cut and dressed in shockingly white pants; he wears cowboys boots, a gold watch, and on his hip is a pager, giving us the impression of a person of means and occupation. He crosses the frame from right to left, forcing our attention and soliciting us to follow him

through the streets of Guadalajara. In the background we hear the music of a French horn. Arriving at a doorway, he passes inside out of view. The camera rises up the façade of the building to settle on a sign affixed to a balcony which reads “*hospedaje*”, lodging. His appearance and attire do not intimate that he would reside in a boardinghouse; thus we assume he is entering for a visit.

The scene changes abruptly, and we are presented with a close up of the French horn to which we have been listening. The bell is angled slightly toward us, revealing the aperture to the pipe into which is thrust the fist of the player whose arm is bare to the elbow. The image is phallic and penetrative; the horizontal arm appears poised to delve deeper into the pipe. The analogy is enhanced in that the instrument is cradled in the crotch of the player who appears naked to the hips but for the hint of a pair of shorts in the left of the frame; his thighs, accentuated by reflected light, frame the instrument, closing the form. As we shall soon see Rodolfo enter the scene and understand the romantic nature of their relationship, this tight image, which fills the entire frame, is a potent metaphor for Ramón’s sexuality. It is muffled and repressed, yet the music is sweet, gentle, and simple.

Slowly the camera climbs Ramón’s torso, dressed in a plain, white, V-necked T-shirt, for a close up of his face seen in profile. Ramón fills the whole frame, we observe him but do not enter into the scene, and the shot is still, allowing us to take in his handsomeness and the extent to which he is focused on his music. Around his neck is a thin, gold chain with a cross which sits on his chest, suggesting an attachment to traditional mores. He is handsome and youthful.

In the background we hear Rodolfo greeting the receptionist of the boardinghouse, and Ramón’s face turns toward us for a full front shot that allows us to see his happiness at the sound

of Rodolfo's voice. As he stands and walks around the room, his shorts are rolled high at the waist, revealing his thighs and emphasizing his genitals, yet his lightness and happiness register nothing lurid; instead he is soft and nymph-like as he prepares to receive his lover. He opens the door, and Rodolfo enters his room with a smile; they kiss passionately.

Ramón excuses himself to bathe, and Rodolfo stays to wait for him in his room. However, Rodolfo does not politely wait on the balcony, as at first he seems about to do, rather he procures the key to Ramón's wardrobe and proceeds to choose Ramón's outfit, unbidden by Ramón. On the inside of the wardrobe door are two photographs, one of Rodolfo and Ramón rather scantily clad in summer shorts and, below it, another of Ramón's parents, taken in the countryside, his father wearing a cowboy hat, which reveals Ramón's humble, country origins. Behind the photograph of Ramón's parents there is a stashed letter, which Rodolfo extracts from the hiding place and proceeds to read. Enclosed with the letter is a check assumedly to cover Ramón's living expenses as a student.

The age difference between the two, although not exaggerated, is still pronounced; however, the relationship appears blissful. Their smiles are genuine, warm, and inviting. Nevertheless, there is an invasive, almost sneaky, quality to Rodolfo reading Ramón's parents' letter which seems inappropriate, echoing his selection of Ramón's outfit without having been asked to do so.

When Ramón returns from his bath, Rodolfo takes his towel and offers to dry him. Ramón agrees and settles onto Rodolfo's lap like a child. Rodolfo, in turn, speaks to Ramón as if to a child, using diminutives to name his body parts as he dries them. Although the scene does



not play out as grossly inappropriate; it does, however, seem overly saccharine and lacks the feel of two men who come together as equals.

Rodolfo lays Ramón out on the bed and begins to kiss him when there is a knock at the door. Obviously frustrated by the disturbance, Rodolfo slumps onto his back and rolls his eyes in an exaggerated fashion. Ramón goes to the door to find his fellow boardinghouse neighbor, Eduardo, who needs the return of a hammer which he has lent to Ramón. After Ramón returns the hammer and closes the door, Rodolfo stands up and proclaims, “No se puede estar aquí; siempre nos están interrumpiendo.”<sup>1</sup> He proceeds to complain that the neighbor is attracted to Ramón, which Ramón denies, but we are left to understand that Rodolfo fears the loss of Ramón to another man. We view the exchange through the reflection of Ramón’s wardrobe mirrors, each framed in a separate pane, isolating one from the other, yet as Rodolfo again becomes flirtatious, the camera zooms into their lying together on the bed, reuniting them within the frame of one mirror pane for a closed shot that emphasizes their intimacy.

As they move again to initiate lovemaking, Rodolfo’s pager begins to sound. Ramón announces immediately, “Tu mamá.”<sup>2</sup> Rodolfo suggests that it could be the hospital, but Ramón retorts, “Apuesto que es tu mamá,”<sup>3</sup> leading us to believe that Rodolfo’s mother is a regular cause of interruption. When Rodolfo lays his pager to the side with the intention of ignoring it, we hear a phone begin to ring in the foyer; moments later the boardinghouse receptionist calls up to Ramón to announce that Doña Herlinda, Rodolfo’s mother, is on the line. Ramón contests,

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<sup>1</sup> “We cannot stay here; they are always interrupting us.”

<sup>2</sup> “Your mom.”

<sup>3</sup> “I bet it’s your mom.”

“Te dije.”<sup>4</sup> When Ramón goes to the phone, their ensuing conversation leads us to understand that they are due to meet up with Doña Herlinda; however, she goes on to announce that they need to stop to pick up Olga along the way who will be joining their group.

The scene flashes forward to Ramón and Rodolfo together in Rodolfo’s car as they wait for Olga to come join them. Ramón lists a roster of women’s names that Doña Herlinda has apparently tried to set up with Rodolfo, complaining that she will not quit. Rodolfo responds, “Nada me cuesta seguir la corriente; así la tengo tranquila.”<sup>5</sup> Here we learn both that Rodolfo panders to his mother and that he does not take seriously Ramón’s concerns regarding his mother’s matchmaking.

When Olga emerges from her home to join them in the car, the close up of the triad is framed tightly by the vehicle, emphasizing both a trapped feeling and a sense of being bound together. Ramón is severely nonplused and leans the passenger seat forward without himself exiting the vehicle, which signals Olga to get into the back and, thus, to know her place. The camera focuses in for a close up of Olga’s face as Rodolfo introduces Ramón to her. Her face is slightly overshadowed, diminishing her importance. However, in his introduction Rodolfo asks if she remembers what he had told her about Ramón, which implies he has spent time with her already, without Ramón, threatening Ramón’s standing. However, the scene ends with Ramón proclaiming that Doña Herlinda never misses a Sunday at Chapala, their destination, and apparently neither do they, which reasserts Ramón’s prominence in the on-going’s of the family.

These first scenes, then, establish the roles of the key players and introduce the primary sources of contention between our protagonists. There exists a genuine romance between Ramón

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<sup>4</sup> “I told you so.”

<sup>5</sup> “It’s no big deal for me to go with the flow; this way I keep her quiet.”

and Rodolfo which is, however, not without apparent boundary issues and something of an infantilizing element. Rodolfo is unhappy with Ramón's living situation and feels that the two can have no privacy there; moreover, he is jealous of Ramón's interactions with fellow boarders and fears that other men might try to seduce Ramón.

Imposing on them, with apparent regularity, is Rodolfo's mother, Doña Herlinda, with whom it is understood Ramón and Rodolfo pass much time. She introduces one eligible bachelorette after another to Rodolfo, which implies her ardent wish for him to settle down with a woman, obviously threatening the relationship between him and Ramón, who does not appreciate the interference, although Rodolfo does not seem to consider Ramón's unhappiness regarding his mother's matchmaking something to be taken seriously, which calls into question the nature of his personal commitment to Ramón or, at least to Ramón's happiness.

Olga, the newest addition to the menagerie, is stately and attractive and would seem the perfect complement to Rodolfo for the purposes of public appearance. She has obviously met Rodolfo before, which suggests a familiarity that does not include Ramón. Rodolfo has, nevertheless, already spoken to her about Ramón, implying the he wishes the two relate to each other.

What is unclear, however, are Rodolfo's intentions. A level of intimacy between him and Ramón is evidently well established, not simply via the signs of sexual interplay but, more importantly, via his intimate relationship to Ramón's person and even belongings. He does not, however, evince clear boundaries which would reinforce their relationship and diminish the threat of Doña Herlinda's meddling. The following scenes will elucidate this apparent oversight,

as we come to understand the deeper unbalance, which is born of and will further promote a network of highly restrictive binding relationships.

### Building the Bind:

As the four arrive at Lake Chapala, we will begin to see more clearly the workings of the relationships between them. The prominence of Doña Helinda as ringleader and puppeteer is evident. The addition of Olga as a potential wedge between Ramón and Rodolfo begins to feel less like “going with the flow” and more like a new permanent fixture, while Ramón and Rodolfo vie for each other’s attentions and loyalty.

The scene at Chapala begins with a panning long shot of the clientele at an outdoor café. The guests appear homogenously as upper middle class, middle aged, and established. The ambience is formal, simple but elegant. A mariachi band weaves among the tables playing traditional music and serenading the guests. It is the picture of affluence and normalcy.

As the four enter, they process as if keeping court, Doña Herlinda is on the arm of her son, Rodolfo. She is wearing a solid red dress, drawing the eye to her. The red, although not connoting sexual passion, does emphasize the intensity of her personality and the prominence of her role in their group. Ramón is dressed in solid white, although about his waist he wears a red belt, which intersects with the red of Doña Herlinda’s garb, prophetically calling to mind not a belt but a leash. Olga is dressed in brown and grey, again reducing her prominence and keeping her safely behind Doña Herlinda in the order of importance. Rodolfo, however, wears a grey shirt with his bright white trousers, alleging links to both Ramón and Olga and presaging eventual divided loyalties.

As the three settle in around their table, Doña Herlinda bids her son's two courtiers sit on either side of her, and she calls Olga with her name in the diminutive, *Olguita*, establishing a heightened level of intimacy between them. The three order Tequila, a traditional drink, yet Ramón orders a *Cuba libre*,<sup>6</sup> a name evoking both liberation and alternative politics. Doña Herlinda asks for light snacks only, as they will be dining elsewhere, obviously orchestrating the situation.

As the scene progresses, Ramón takes out a pack of cigarettes and offers one to Rodolfo, who refuses; however, when Olga requests one, Ramón slowly pushes the pack toward her with hardly veiled disdain. The smile on Rodolfo's face disappears and he inserts himself as the gentleman and withdraws a cigarette and lights it for her. The camera pans slowly from right to left, eliminating Ramón from the frame, settling on Rodolfo and Olga, casting them in a two shot and concretizing their budding relationship. Rodolfo looks at her flirtatiously, and she guides his hand toward her mouth to light the cigarette. The camera pans quickly to the right for a full front shot of Ramón who hardly masks his feeling dejected. Consequently, he takes a deep swig of his *Cuba libre*.

As guests begin to find their way to the previously empty dancefloor, Rodolfo asks Olga to dance. The two proceed, leaving Ramón rather tellingly with Doña Herlinda. As they watch on, three young people come to sit at the table beside them. One girl, approximately Ramón's age, is sporting a red skirt every bit as bold as Doña Herlinda's dress, demarcating her as a potential threat. Immediately she looks over at Ramón, and the two exchange flirtatious eye contact. Ramón turns to the dancefloor where Rodolfo and Olga are dancing in an open form

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<sup>6</sup> "Free Cuba," i.e. rum and coke

two shot that seems to ask for additions. It is not long before the couple who accompanied the girl in the red skirt joins them, replacing Rodolfo and Olga as the center of attention and casting them into the background. The camera returns to Doña Herlinda and Ramón at their table with the girl in red in the background fixing Ramón with her gaze. Soon he excuses himself and goes to ask her to dance. Doña Herlinda is taken by surprise by the move and looks on with worried mien. Ramón and his new partner begin to dance enthusiastically, and Rodolfo repeatedly directs his gaze in their direction, obviously fixated. The camera zooms in for a medium shot of Ramón and his partner, excluding Rodolfo and Olga from the frame. Ramón and his partner dance exuberantly and in fair unison. The full front shot of Ramón registers his enjoyment.

The camera quickly shifts to a medium two shot of Rodolfo and Olga, the former having definitely slowed his pace and registering annoyed affect with his gaze fixed on Ramón who continues to enjoy himself. Before long Rodolfo reaches a breaking point of frustration and leads Olga briskly from the dancefloor. As they return to the table, Doña Herlinda has her back to the camera watching the whole dancefloor drama unfold. As she turns, her eyes register distressed affect. Although she forces a tierce smile, her eyes continuously turn to assess her son.

The camera shifts to a medium solo shot of Rodolfo whose brooding glare is fixed on Ramón and the girl in the red skirt. He downs his shot of tequila in one draught and quickly turns to signal the waiter for another. Doña Herlinda, in three quarter turn, which makes us feel like we are eavesdropping on the exchange, quickly censures Rodolfo; she states courtly, “Yo no bebo así,”<sup>7</sup> which apparently establishes the standard for respectable imbibing.

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<sup>7</sup> “I don’t drink that way.”

A few moments later, the camera finds its way to the neighboring table where Ramón sits making happy conversation with his new friends. He turns to look at the other table, and Rodolfo is veritably snarling, exhibiting almost physical discomfort. For a brief moment a small child approaches Doña Herlinda's table completing a fleeting, yet prophetic, image of the ideal heterosexist scenario of grandmother with son and daughter-in-law accompanied by a possible grandchild. Meanwhile, in the background Rodolfo reaches into his pocket to find the cash to pay the waiter for the newly delivered tequila which he proceeds to down in one gulp.

As if on signal, Doña Herlinda rises to leave, and Olga and Rodolfo immediately follow suit. Doña Herlinda with a smiling face calls to Ramón who rises on command to take leave of his new friends; the girl in red quickly slips him her number, which he pockets, then turns to follow the others who precede him. Rodolfo is flanked on either side by the women whom he accompanies locked arm in arm.

As they exit the veranda, Doña Herlinda holds back to join Ramón who is following Rodolfo and Olga with his eyes. Doña Herlinda takes Ramón by his arm and pulls him aside to speak with him privately. She calls him Moncho, as an endearing pet name, which augments the intimacy of the moment but also inserts a form of appropriating control, recalling her use of Olguita. Her ensuing statements force Ramón to affirm her importance to both him and the others, rendering it difficult to censure her for her meddling. She then proclaims, "Entonces no te vuelvo a dejar bailar con nadie. Soy muy celosa."<sup>8</sup> Manipulating him into profession of his appreciation for her, she then appropriates him, an act that deflects affective responsibility away from Rodolfo and ensures there will be no quarrel between him and Ramón, for Doña Herlinda

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<sup>8</sup> "Then, I shall not again allow you to dance with anyone else. I am very jealous."

has seen via the dancefloor drama and subsequent drinking that a Rodolfo deprived of Ramón forgets his manners and falls short of the attentive gentleman which is one of his primary defensive scripts, one upon which she depends as we shall discuss in chapter VII.

The scene closes with Doña Herlinda enlisting Ramón's help to keep Rodolfo from drinking anymore: "En serio, quiero que me ayudes. Por favor, haz que Rodolfo no tome una copa más. Recuerda que mañana opera."<sup>9</sup> The move renders Ramón responsible for Rodolfo's wellbeing and reaffirms him as an important affective piece of the relationship equation.

After a couple of scenes that confirm the lack of privacy at Ramón's boardinghouse as well as the poor cooking with which he contends for his meals, we find Rodolfo and Ramón having lunch at Doña Herlinda's. The two are sat intimately in quarter turn, engaged in a board game which becomes a metaphor for their relationship and living situation; the game is not going well. Stumped, Rodolfo calls to his mother, "¡Mamá! Ramón está en el pozo y yo caí en la cárcel. ¿En estos casos que se hace?"<sup>10</sup> Ramón is drowning, and Rodolfo is imprisoned. The answer to the conundrum will come at lunchtime.

As the meal progresses Doña Herlinda attends Ramón, careful to make him feel at home. At a given point, she and Rodolfo exchange a meaningful glance, and Rodolfo serves Ramón another tequila, promoting a previously mentioned goal to get Ramón just drunk enough to be happy, which we will learn momentarily is really to ensure he agree to the coming proposal.

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<sup>9</sup> "Seriously, I want you to help me. Please, don't let Rodolfo have another drink. Remember that he's operating tomorrow."

<sup>10</sup> "Mom, Ramón is in the well, and I landed in jail. In this scenario, what do we do?"



As he enjoys his homemade food, Doña Herlinda and Rodolfo begin to tag team Ramón. They draw attention to the lack of comforts at Ramón's boardinghouse. Ramón then mentions that his frequent visits to Doña Herlinda's make it bearable. Ramón, in his politeness, apologizes if he is too demanding of their hospitality to which Doña Herlinda responds, "¡Qué va! Al contrario, nos encantaría tenerte aquí para siempre,"<sup>11</sup> to which Ramón responds, "Vengo casi todos los días,"<sup>12</sup> to which Doña Herlinda replies, "¿Y qué tal si también te quedaras todas las noches?"<sup>13</sup> Ramón hesitates, but when she adds, "Lugar hay. Ya ves lo amplio que es la recámara de Rodolfo,"<sup>14</sup> the food falls from Ramón's hands. Ramón hangs his head and says nothing. The camera moves to a wide angle shot that takes in the three seated around the table. The lighting focuses on Doña Herlinda and Rodolfo, empowering them, while Ramón is overshadowed, signaling the degree to which he is, or at least feels, powerless or ashamed at the invitation. "¿Qué te parece la idea?"<sup>15</sup> Rodolfo inquires. Ramón is speechless and tries to pretend as if nothing has happened. He avoids eye contact and resumes eating listlessly. The two continue to accost him with reasons for which he should move in. Ramón never replies, but at the shift of scene, they are moving Ramón into Rodolfo's room.

When finally alone, Rodolfo asks, "¿No te tenías muchas ganas de vivir conmigo? Casi tuve que forzarte."<sup>16</sup> Ramón remains speechless; his head cast in shadows, he diverts his gaze.

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<sup>11</sup> "Please! On the contrary, we would love to have you here always."

<sup>12</sup> "I come almost every day."

<sup>13</sup> "And what if you were also to stay every night?"

<sup>14</sup> "Indeed, you see how spacious Rodolfo's room is."

<sup>15</sup> "What do you think of the idea?"

<sup>16</sup> "Didn't you want to live with me? I almost had to force you."

Rodolfo moves Ramón to the bed and forces him to lie down. The high angle shot combined with Rodolfo lounging half on top of him emphasizes Ramón's sense of having no say in the matter. He seems disoriented, and tries to free himself from Rodolfo's fondling hands.

When finally Ramón speaks, it is to try to make sense of what has just happened and how is it that Doña Herlinda accepts the situation. Rodolfo goes on to explain that he has had friends sleep over since he was in high school, so she is accustomed to it. "Entonces," Ramón pries ¿ella sabe?"<sup>17</sup> "No," Rodolfo chuckles, "pero creo que se lo imagina."<sup>18</sup> The confusing scenario explains much concerning the mother-son relationship. The silence surrounding the matter reinforces the taboo, rendering Rodolfo's homosexuality shameful. However, the tacit complicitousness of Doña Herlinda implies she is, indeed, wise to the situation, making her an unspoken ally or, at least, neutral; here, though, the silence still looms large. Weighing heavily are questions as to why she remains silent and what might be her motivations. Ramón, perhaps a bit satisfied yet still seeming bewildered, reaches for Rodolfo for the first time.

The scene shifts suddenly to Doña Herlinda seated cross-legged on her bed on the other side of the wall from Rodolfo and Ramón; she is dressed in a colorful robe. In the background the music is *allegro* and bright. The light from the lamp on her nightstand shines down onto a framed photograph of Rodolfo looking dapper and illuminates the magazine which she is reading. As the camera slowly zooms in, we come to realize she is leafing through a bridal magazine. Suddenly, all is clear. With Ramón moved in, Rodolfo will behave, and Doña Herlinda will be granted her wish.

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<sup>17</sup> "So, she knows?"

<sup>18</sup> "No, but I think she imagines it."

Cinching the bind:

We encounter our lovers in the crisp white sauna of Doña Herlinda's home after a scene involving a visit from Ramón's parents who come to Guadalajara to bury Ramón's great uncle, in which Doña Herlinda and Rodolfo charm Ramón's parents to such an extent that they leave accepting of their son's living arrangements, believing him to be among genteel peers who support him in his absolute dedication to music which is a defensive script used to deflect his mother's concern for Ramón's apparent lack of other social, especially romantic, interests and his apparent attachment to Rodolfo. They lie nude on the sauna bench, steaming and intertwined, at, what appears to be, complete ease. Ramón lies nestled in between Rodolfo's thighs with his head rested on Rodolfo's belly. Their skin tones flow in complete harmony, and the angles of their legs confuse the viewer, who struggles to see where one begins and the other ends. The form is closed on the right, but open to the left, where Ramón's leg extends beyond the frame, creating an illusion of space for their intimacy. This quasi *trompe l'oeil* of tangled legs in extending space on a background of pure, expansive white creates a sense of freedom and intimacy in what is realistically a tight, enclosed, even suffocating, space which is, perhaps, just as much a prison cell as a sanctuary. Rodolfo sits in profile, keeping us at bay, as Ramón turns his head in quarter turn, helping us to participate, if only a bit, in their intimacy.

We observe as Rodolfo practices recitation, Ramón listening carefully, prompting Rodolfo when he falters:

A veces pienso en darte  
mi eterna despedida,

borrarte en mis recuerdos  
y huir de esta pasión;  
mas si es en vano todo  
y mi alma no te olvida,  
¡qué quieres tú que yo haga  
pedazo de mi vida;  
qué quieres tú que yo haga  
con este corazón!<sup>19</sup>

The poem, a lament to an unattainable lover and unrealizable love, contradicts the harmonious visuals reinforcing the sauna as cell, or even tomb, in which the affections of the two are contained. The speaking lover is confronting the dilemma, asking what the lover can do, even if he wishes to end the love, if his soul cannot do so. It presages a desperate course of action rife with conflicted interests, compromised priorities, and divided loyalties.

Soon, in a new scene, we return again to the sauna. Ramón is upset after Rodolfo has announced that he will be going on a date alone with Olga. Ramón fills the frame with a full front shot that renders us witness to his distress. He sits cornered in the sauna which now appears small and suffocating, closed in by the walls, his eyes almost dissociated. Rodolfo joins him and coyly tries to initiate sex to alter the mood. The camera, excluding Rodolfo, zooms in for a close up of Ramón who demands that Rodolfo make up his mind. The camera pans to Rodolfo excluding Ramón, creating the sense of division between them. Ramón affirms that he

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<sup>19</sup> "At times I think of giving you/my eternal good-bye,/erase your from my memories/ and flee from this passion;/but if everything is in vain/and my soul does not forget you,/what do you want me to do/ you piece of my life;/what do you want me to do/with this heart!" Extracted from Manuel Acuña's "Nocturno a Rosario," a poem to a married woman he cannot possess and because of whom it is often theorized he committed suicide at twenty-four years of age.

knows that Rodolfo only entertains Olga to please his mother. Rodolfo swears that it is the case, but he then confesses that the following week he will ask for Olga's hand in marriage. The camera scene shifts abruptly to a close up of Ramón underneath a cold shower trying to regain his wits from the shock.

When Ramón returns to the sauna, the camera angle has shifted drastically. We see them in profile, driving a wedge into the intimacy. Ramón sits down and announces that he will leave as soon as possible. Rodolfo, turning to face him, tells him he is crazy, that the wedding will not be for two months. Then, with flirtatious, manipulative eye, in a move to pacify Ramón, he lifts his hands to cajolingly caress Ramón's face and adds, "Además, mamá cuenta con que te quedas a vivir con ella."<sup>20</sup>

The scene shifts to Ramón sat in the park with his friend and confidant, a girl named Billy. He worries, "Si me voy, seguro lo pierdo; si me quedo, tal vez no."<sup>21</sup>

Again the scene shifts us to Doña Herlinda preparing for Rodolfo's engagement party to Olga. She dresses to the nines, and Rodolfo enters dapperly dressed himself. He kneels before his mother to put her shoes on for her, as if she were a queen. In the background, Ramón plays a plaintive melody on his French horn, his instrument expressing what he cannot.

After Doña Herlinda and Rodolfo have left to join Olga and her family, we find Ramón on the floor making his way through a bottle of tequila. In the background Juan Gabriel sings diegetically "Inocente y pobre amiga," a version that gives a man's voice singing the thoughts of the jilted female lover, which aligns it seamlessly to Ramón's inner lament:

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<sup>20</sup> "Besides, Mom is counting on your staying on to live with her."

<sup>21</sup> "If I leave, assuredly I lose him. If I stay, perhaps not."

Que te vas a ir con ella  
está bien yo no lo opongo.  
Te deseo que seas feliz,  
pero te voy a advertir  
que si vuelves otra vez, no respondo<sup>22</sup>

The song echoes his desperation and resignation. He knows that he can do nothing to stop the nuptials. However, it also gives the hint of a resolution in the making, the threat that he might leave and not take Rodolfo back.

Nevertheless, the movement of scenes ends with Ramón weeping in Rodolfo's arms who tries to console him. On the other side of the wall, Doña Herlinda listens to his weeping with indifference, her face emotionless. The calm lighting reveals that she feels none of Ramón's angst, for she, at least, has attained her goal.

The Die is Cast:

The following scene begins with Ramón leaving the wedding ceremony which is taking place in Doña Herlinda's living room. He is walking slouched over and appears mildly confused, as if he does not quite know where he is going; he hesitates on more than one occasion. In the background we heard the firm, authoritative voice of the celebrant reciting "La Espístola de Melchor Ocampo," "Este es el único medio moral de fundar la familia, de conservar la especies, y de suplir las imperfecciones del individuo que no puede bastarse a sí mismo para

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<sup>22</sup> "You're going to go with her/it's alright, I shan't oppose it/but I am going to warn you/that if you come back again/I won't answer."

llegar a la perfección del género humano...”<sup>23</sup> As the celebrant continues the traditional wedding reading, a creed of heterosexism, which cannot but echo out as a condemnation of the love between Ramón and Rodolfo, Ramón makes his way to the sauna on the other side of the yard and closes the door. The muted tones of the celebrant continue as Ramón sits in the otherwise abandoned sauna, which is now cold and dark. He sits in the corner and wraps his hands around his knee, meditative, pensive, and silent.

While Rodolfo and Olga are off on their honeymoon, Doña Herlinda and Ramón go about the city together. Their meandering takes them to the Hospicio Cabaña and to the fresco of Orozco, *El Hombre de Fuego*, a dramatic and pained image of a man being consumed by fire surrounded by the encircling arms of two other figures. The metaphor evokes Ramón’s own affective disintegration trapped between Rodolfo and Olga, the fire of his passion and bind consuming him.

As they continue to roam the city, we find them in an antique shop. As Doña Herlinda looks about, a young, handsome fellow shopper, appearing to be Ramón’s age, enters the room. He looks flirtatiously to Ramón who makes his way over. They begin to chat, but when the young man asks for a date with Ramón, Ramón panics, says he is not from Guadalajara, and returns quickly to Doña Herlinda’s side. The young man shrugs and continues shopping, but we have understood that Ramón cannot find his way away from the bind of his life with Rodolfo.

In the following scene, Ramón is on the bus. He is wearing Rodolfo’s old pager so that Doña Herlinda can page him at will. Ramón returns with his friend Billy to his old boardinghouse, hoping to find lodging in what we understand to be a bid to escape from the bind

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<sup>23</sup> “This is the only moral means of founding the family, of conserving the species, and of making up for the imperfections of the individual who is not sufficient in and of himself to arrive at human perfection.”

in which he finds himself. The boardinghouse, though, is in the process of renovation to be turned into a hotel for American tourists, and Eduardo, the hammer wielding threat to Rodolfo's hold on Ramón is no longer in residence, having left immediately after Ramón moved to Doña Herlinda's.

Little by little Ramón's chances for escape dwindle. When Rodolfo and Olga return from their honeymoon, the four eventually have a dinner party together at Olga and Rodolfo's new apartment. After looking at the slides of the honeymoon, Doña Herlinda reveals her big surprise. They all huddle around a blueprint which she unfolds. In a reflection on the table we see their on-looking faces as if we espy a family portrait, but as Doña Herlinda goes on to explain the architectural plans she is laying out, the camera moves in for a close up of the blueprint excluding any evidence of Ramón from the shot. The home renovations will involve a large living space for Olga and Rodolfo. For Ramón, though, there will be a studio in the tower. He will be kept, enclosed within the family compound, yet isolated, while being at the center of the bind. For Ramón there will be no escape. He will never attain his wish to live alone with Rodolfo, nor will he ever be more than the lover kept at convenient beck and call.

In the final scene of the film, Ramón has been made godfather to Olga and Rodolfo's first child, a final nail in the proverbial coffin of Ramón's independence. At the baptism reception, Rodolfo has been asked to recite a poem to the assembled guests. As he recites, Ramón and Olga sit to his right, the one listening intently, the other nursing the infant. We return to Acuña:

¡Que hermoso hubiera sido  
vivir bajo aquel techo  
los dos unidos siempre  
y amándonos los dos;



tú siempre enamorada  
yo siempre satisfecho  
los dos, un alma sola,  
los dos, un solo pecho,  
y en medio de nosotros  
mi madre como un Dios!<sup>24</sup>

With dramatic flair, Rodolfo extends his arm to his mother, who is seated to his left, like a queen on her throne. She looks directly at the camera; her smile befits a portrait. She is centered in the frame. Everything points to her as the centrifugal force of the bind. As the camera pulls away, broadening the scope of the frame to a long shot, she never stops looking at us and Rodolfo, Ramón, and Olga sit with their gaze fixed upon her. The music is victorious.

*Doña Herlinda y su Hijo*, then, is the story of the creation of a bind and of its far-reaching capacity to manipulate all involved. In the background is a heterosexist culture which provides no outlet for homosexuals to express themselves openly and freely. The *sine qua non* of this particular family bind is the overbearing mother, Doña Herlinda, who, although apparently insouciant as to the nature of her son's true feelings or exploits, will have her public appearance and coveted grandchildren. Rodolfo is overbonded to her, and the two form a "gruesome twosome," impossible to separate, she keeping him at pager's length, he making important life decisions based on her whim.

Rodolfo is bound by his mother's affections. Her demands on his time keep him from breaking free and establishing his personal life away from her eye. Still, although his mobility is

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<sup>24</sup> "How beautiful it would have been/to live beneath that roof,/the two united forever/a loving each other the both of us;/you always in love,/I always satisfied,/the two, one soul,/the two, one sole breast,/and in the middle of us/my mother like a god!"

greatly restricted, he is able to adapt via the use of carefully honed defensive scripts that permit him to deviate on the side while also attaining to her demands.

In turn, the nature of Rodolfo's affection for Ramón reveals that he has internalized his mother's capacity to manipulate. He uses a careful balance of guilt, affection, and gift to keep Ramón close to him. He is able, thus, to betray Ramón's trust and cause him intense psychological suffering without losing Ramón. As a binding agent, himself caught in a bind, the veneer of his composure is tenuous and clearly dependent on both pleasing his mother and possessing Ramón. Moreover, we witness that he is unable to maintain decorum if either is threatened.

Ramón is powerfully bound not only to Rodolfo but also to Doña Herlinda. The two move methodically to create the bind around him; indeed, they are often overtly in cahoots. The result is that Ramón finds himself checked at every turn. His apparently genuine affection for Rodolfo impedes him from exercising independence, which is complicated further by a living arrangement that holds him monitored and reduces the occasion for him to act independently.

Ultimately, for fear of losing Rodolfo, he submits to the bind. Far from attaining his wish to live independently with Rodolfo, he repairs to a studio in the tower at the heart of the family compound. He is both central to everyone's happiness and kept, if not against his will, certainly without an authoritative means of influencing the situation without also risking his relationship with Rodolfo. The arrangement is an expression of his centrality and of his imprisonment.

The family bind in its immediacy, however, is not completely negative, for it is also an expression of adaptation for individuals unable, or at least perceiving themselves to be unable, to make a life of their choosing under the scrutiny of the public eye. The heterosexism and

traditional religious culture of the local, circa 1985, limit the mobility of Rodolfo and Ramón in society. Justifiably afraid of loss of both traditional family relationships and public standing, they assume the roles available to them. Within these roles, they seek the moments of consolation which arise, and the whole of their efforts stabilizes their otherwise questionable ability to adapt socially to a world which will not embrace them.

In the next film, we will consider a scenario in which the bound individual defies the bind and breaks free even at the price of losing the cultural signposts upon which he has been raised to depend.

## Chapter V: *Edge of Seventeen*—Fleeing the Bind

*Doña Herlinda y su Hijo* brings us into the heart of the bind and leaves us there. The bind restricts more and more tightly until our characters are completely controlled by the structure of their interconnected relationships. On the one hand they live within a space of greatly restricted mobility; on the other hand, the structure of the bind provides a framework within which they never have to encounter publically the discreditation from which their closet protects them. *Edge of Seventeen*, however, brings us into a closeted scenario that is ready to disintegrate, forcing our protagonist not only to grapple with the pressures of coming out of the closet but also then to rebuild his social world from the rubble. Ultimately, the choice will be whether or not to assume his identity as a homosexual and, in so doing, lose the relationships that have supported him thus far or to submit to the exigencies of the closet and forever deny himself.

The movie begins with our protagonist, Eric, a rather lanky, awkward appearing high schooler, dressing for the first day of his summer job. He has been hired to work in the food service of an amusement park. He will be working with his best friend, Maggie. They evince the sort of relationship replete with synchronicity and complicity typical of two teenagers who have been friends throughout their school years. They are easy to mistake for boyfriend and girlfriend, not on account of signs of physical affection, but rather because of the mutuality between them, causing them to appear inseparable, a veritable duo.

At their new job at the amusement park, a place by nature transient which evokes movement, perhaps, transformation, certainly a lack of stability, they encounter Angie, their boss for the summer, whose butch persona immediately causes one to question her sexuality, and Rod,

a handsome, blonde college student with flirtatious eyes, a winning smile, and sensuous demeanor. The two are stark deviations from the vanilla normalcy which Eric and Maggie exude. Indeed, Rod and Angie will prove to be the Schefflenesque critical encounter that will jostle Eric from his gauche, somnambulant existence and awaken in him a sexual consciousness hitherto elusively dormant.

Early on in their time working together, Eric finds himself on lunch break with Rod. Eric is seated at a picnic table eating the lunch his mother has prepared for him. He is listening to headphones, a reflection of his love for music but also an allegory for sheltered, almost oblivious, life which keeps him insulated from the world at large. He looks up to see Rod ordering lunch at the counter in front of him. The soundtrack rings out, “Ooh, give me two strong arms to protect myself. Ooh, give me so much love that I forget myself.” The lyrics unapologetically reiterate the essence of Eric’s ripe to be picked, albeit innocent, presentation. Rod has swagger and hungry eyes that zoom in on Eric as soon as he turns with his tray to find a seat. As Rod advances towards the table, Eric extracts from his brown bag lunch a note from his mother which reads, “Don’t work too hard! Love Mom,” reemphasizing the infantilizing, saccharine nature of their relationship. As Rod approaches, Eric quickly shoves the note back into the bag as to avoid appearing insufficiently socialized and overbonded to his mother. The music continues, “I need to swing from limb to limb to relieve this mess I’m in because when depression starts to win I’m too weak,” a clear indication of Eric’s need to break free from the constraints of his life and also an indicator that beneath the peachy veneer there may be some unsettled, emotional issues.

As Rod sits down, the conversation is quickly flirtatious and inquisitive. They begin playful banter over music with kinesics that easily read as flirtatious, even if unconsciously so,

on Eric's part. The behavior does, however, occur immediately and automatically, as if boyishly awkward, googly eyes for Rod were a natural *modus operandi* for Eric, which Rod overtly enjoys with a playful smirk. Conversation moves to Maggie, and Rod inquires if she is Eric's girlfriend, to which Eric finds no direct answer; far from being a coquettish response, it illustrates how unclear matters of sexuality are for Eric, who then asks Rod if he has a girlfriend. Rod daringly replies, "Yeah, his name's Danny," intoning the boy's name with a certain bravado, a direct act of coming out and one meant to challenge Eric's apparent innocence. The camera moves back and forth from one to the other, emphasizing the act of encounter and putting each on the spot as do their questions.

When Maggie comes to sit with them, Eric stands to leave, fumbling over his brown bag and wrappers, awkwardly excusing himself. Being flanked by Rod and Maggie, a collision of two worlds, seems too uncomfortable for Eric bear. Rod chuckles, as he watches him with a wide, telling grin, and Maggie can make no sense of Eric's apparent need to flee the scene. Rod makes no move to stay Eric. The bomb has been dropped; the point has been made. Eric's sexual disavowal has been challenged.

The scene shifts to Eric and Maggie in Eric's bedroom. Eric has hung up a poster of New York, an admission that New York is the university Mecca to which Eric aspires in lieu of Ohio State University which appears to be his destiny. As they converse, Eric stretches out on his bed, Maggie sits beside him, their positioning familiar and comfortable, yet unaligned, Maggie reveals with hushed, mildly shocked tones that she has learned that Rod and Angie are both gay. Eric responds with silence; he says nothing. His expression reads as one trying to offer no expression to be read. Maggie, apparently unsatisfied with his apparent ambivalence, goads him on for a response. Eric shakes his head, and murmurs, "I don't know," avoiding any further

conversation on the matter. Eric sits up on his elbows and, changing the subject, admits, “I hate how my hair looks,” which is the first sign of a growing urge he is feeling to change, to transform his persona. Eric randomly asks if Maggie thinks he is cute, which elicits an awkward giggle from her and leads to an even more awkward kiss, a rather passionless, exploratory kiss, which leads to further speechlessness on Eric’s part.

In subsequent scenes, Maggie cuts Eric’s hair, beginning what will be a thorough transformation of physical appearance. His mother approves of the new coif as do his coworkers, especially Danny. Indeed, an encounter between the two in the restaurant’s walk-in refrigerator makes it plain that Eric finds Rod every bit as sexually stimulating as Rod apparently finds him. Not only is the attraction mutual, but it would seem that the very presence of the one evokes automatic response in the other. Not only does Eric appear not to flee from his attraction to Rod, it would seem that he cannot help but act on it.

#### Sexual awakening:

Later, at the local diner, Maggie and Eric are sharing an ice-cream sundae. Conversation revolves around work, and Maggie relates that Angie had been going around asking other employees’ virginity status. Maggie admits that she has fibbed, having told the group that she and Eric had had sex, in the admission her eyes are playful, “I said that we did it.” Eric’s reaction is incredulous then mildly shocked and even nonplused. His discomfort translates into nervous chuckling and an inability to finish a coherent sentence. Maggie, unsettled by his reaction, ventures, “Eric don’t hate me,” to which he tries rather unsuccessfully to respond. His continued silence provokes Maggie to ask exasperatedly, “Would it be that bad,” to which Eric

still seems unable to formulate a response, recessing into silence. Moving on, she proffers, “You should have seen Rod’s face, though when I said it. I think he was jealous.” Eric’s eyes fix her intensely for the first time since the conversation began. She continues, “I think he likes you.” Eric refuses, “No he doesn’t,” but his face is smiling. Suddenly, after a series of shots switching back and forth between them, each frame isolating the one from the other as did the conversation, the camera changes to a medium two shot of them in profile, seated at the table centered on their sundae; the composition of the shot echoes a return to natural, comfortable conversation between them, friendly banter as opposed to sexualized intimacy.

A scene shift brings Eric to the record store where he nervously and rather sneakily selects an album with a pink triangle centered on the back cover. Later, he is in his room listening to Jimmy Somerville, the lead singer of the Bronski Beat, belting out the revelatory, diegetic lyrics, “Tell me why? Tell me why?” as if echoing Eric’s own question. He is lying on his bedroom floor, listening to the music with headphones on, rendering the act even more secretive. We view him from a high-angle shot, accentuating his vulnerability as he listens to what seems almost contraband music. His mother enters his room without knocking which is apparently her wont; she bears laundry to be put away and takes no notice of him on the floor as if all were normal. Eric, though, upon noticing her, bolts up with offended mien and asks abruptly, “Can you knock?” The mother apologizes with a chuckle, not registering her son’s discomfort, as he slips the record cover behind his back. Here, as the weight of the closet begins to set in, we see the signs of Eric beginning to compartmentalize his life. Fear of discovery accompanies his sexual awakening, eventuating and eventuated by his closet. Eric is discreditable, and he has begun the careful game of impression management.



Felicitous sex with Rod confirms the hitherto only posited. Eric is gay, and things are different; he is different. The first day of senior year, finds him going to school in fancy new clothes of his own choosing, breaking away from the restraints of his mother's selections. His shirt has a floral print that blooms as he is blooming, the whole look reflecting a stylish, New York-bound attitude. Four consecutive scenes of changing outfits reveal the extent of his transformation. In his notebook he scribbles his initials with Rod's as he muses about life in the big city.

The scene shifts to Eric's mom entering his bedroom after she has knocked, adapting to his unexplained, newfound need for privacy. She comes in to listen to his new musical remix and approves of his work, noting that it's different, "a little more serious maybe." We learn that she had also been a university student specializing in music but had given it all up to assume the traditional role of housewife and mother when she met the man who would become her husband.

The questions turn to love, falling in love, and how one knows when one has met that certain someone. Tentatively, yet intensely, Eric asks, "How did you know when you were in love?" His mother responds, "When I thought about him so much it hurt," which we are to assume echoes that which Eric is feeling about Rod whom he has not seen since the end of their summer employment. She counters, "How come?" to which Eric only shrugs. She furthers, "Are we talking about someone I know?" Eric only diverts eye contact and half-laughes nervously. His closet deepens with the omission of truth, as this breach in trust wounds the interpersonal bridge between them. Eric perceives that he cannot trust his mother with an admission of affection for Rod. His silence both reveals and deepens the shame surrounding his sexuality.

Transformation:

A few scenes later, we find the family seated around the dinner table, a picture of traditional family. Eric is absent. The mother rushes into the kitchen to pull the rolls from the oven when Maggie comes through the door. She tells Eric's mother to close her eyes, as if for a surprise, which she does to play along. Eric enters wearing yet another dramatic outfit and sporting hair dyed orange. When the mother opens her eyes, she gasps from the shock and registers displeased affect. She looks at Maggie censuringly, "It's getting a bit out of hand," her first comment of disapproval regarding the course of Eric's on-going transformation. When Eric counters, "I thought you'd like it," his mother turns away from him without comment and clucks, "Dinner's on the table." With false welcome she asks Maggie if she is staying, to which Maggie tactfully demurs. The scene compounds the rift growing between Eric and his mother. He has already begun to exclude her from areas of his life. Up until this point, however, she has looked favorably upon his newfound interest in fashion which Eric is using as an expression of the self he feels blooming within. Her disapproval, more than simply being a commentary on hair color, is a shaming statement against this emergence which the hair color represents.

In the following scene, Eric is alone on the sofa watching a talk show about transvestites. He is lying in a fetal position on the sofa, communicating his need to self-protect; the light from the television screen illuminates his face, which seems intent but sad. As Eric's father enters the room bringing Eric a bowl of ice-cream, the muffled voice from the television asks how the father of the transvestite being questioned dealt with the transformation. "That's some hairdo," sighs Eric's father as he sits down beside him on the sofa, not making eye contact with Eric, who

responds flatly, “Thanks.” The lack of enthusiasm is shared. The father then looks up to the television and registers exasperated confusion mingled with mild dismissal, “What are you watching?” he asks with dumbfoundedness, to which Eric responds with avoidance, “Oh, just some interview show.” Indeed, as the movie progresses, it becomes ever clearer that avoidance is one of Eric’s primary defensive scripts. As with all defensive scripts, however, what begins as a defense mechanism might very well end up being the cause of eventual downfall.

As the scene with Eric’s father moves on, we come to learn that his parents are intent on being able to send him to New York for university in spite of what are revealed to be financial difficulties. In order to make it happen, Eric’s mother has decided to procure a job, which comes as a shock; “Mom working?” Eric asks surprised. “You know, we’ll do whatever it takes,” Eric’s father continues, to which Eric responds with a look of startled amazement, as if trying to absorb the magnitude of this situation. On the one hand, his mother is returning to work, and his father is confessing to having difficulties making ends meet on his income alone; it is a dual blow to the traditional model upon which the family is built. On the other hand, their determination to rise to the challenge of supporting their son’s aspirations seems to surprise Eric, an acute sign of their commitment to him. However, having in one evening seen both of his parents’ negative affective response to the young person he is proving to be, this commitment is beginning to reveal itself conditional.

The scene shifts to Eric and Maggie attending a party together. Maggie is quickly asked to dance by another young man and, when Eric offers no resistance, she acquiesces leaving Eric to fend for himself. We find him later, having drunk beyond the point of inhibition, seated in between two friends, a position that keeps him fairly safe from the jeers of censoring peers. He goes on to lament the unacceptability of the evening’s musical selections. When, finally, a song

is played of which Eric approves, his present lack of inhibition, combined with his love for the song, spur him on to act rashly. He bounds from the sofa and moves toward the space where others are dancing. He begins to dance uninhibitedly. His body sways to the music; his eyes are shut, savoring the song. Soon all have taken note of his unconventional dancing and stop to stare. Eric, unaware, with eyes closed continues to swish across the room; when finally he bumps into another party-goer, it jostles him from his reverie. The boy with whom he collides retorts, "What are you queer or something?" Another voice censures him succinctly with scornful contempt, "Just leave." Eric looks about himself disoriented and registering panic. He bolts from the party and quickly gets into his car. The close up shot focuses on his face while all else is in darkness. He is lighted from the left, the majority of his face cast in shadows. The tears he is shedding reflect the light and sparkle. There is a portrait-like beauty to the simple, yet effective, composition, and the overall impression is one of marooned devastation and poignant isolation.

The scene shifts with visually shocking contrast to a simple, pink, cinderblock building the façade of which is lit by blue and pink spot lights. Bold against the backdrop of pitchy night, it appears little less than a gay Mecca. Eric pulls into the drive and gets out of the car. The camera shifts to a close up of the name on the building. The name dominates the frame: "The Universal Fruit and Nut Co." It is cleverly humorous and boldly stylized with glimmering silver lettering against the backdrop of a giant cocktail glass, olive and lemon, ready to serve martinis and cosmopolitans, in short, the appropriation of the very image of kitschy gay chic circa mid-1980's.

Slowly Eric approaches and enters into a dark, red-lit hallway, signaling the intensity of the moment and his emotions, along the wall are framed images of stars and divas with an

ecstatic shot of Marilyn Monroe. Eric enters into a dark, crowded room flashing with blue and pink strobe lights. As he sits at the bar, the bartender inquires, “What can I get you, Hon,” a welcoming greeting, to which Eric responds, “a fuzzy navel,” a suitably gay drink. Eric continues to look around with shell-shocked trepidation when a voice echoes out, “Christina, put that drink on the house!” Eric turns and his face lights with surprise, “Lovey!” the voice proclaims, and the surprise image of Angie grabs him into a bear hug. “Let me look at you,” she says. “Oh, almost perfect. Sit.” she clucks, “Honey you showed up at the local queer bar with your makeup smudged. That’s no way to make an entrance,” fussing over him, she blots a cocktail napkin on her tongue and proceeds to clean up his tear-smudged eyeliner. The image is definitively maternal. Angie responds to him as if she were his new gay mother, counterpoising her sharply to Eric’s biological mother. She delights in him, and understands the importance of his appearance, responding with motherly concern. She is excited for him to be there and affectionate, filling a significant affective role in this place that in a moment’s time goes from feeling foreign and suspect to appearing like a safe space where he and his makeup are welcome. She introduces him to friends and takes care of him, according him a network of instant peers who are playful and non-threatening. The Universal Fruit and Nut Co. is a safe zone, or rather the safe zone, Eric’s new home in the making.

After an eventful evening of whiplash extremes, Eric calls Maggie from a payphone and solicits, “I need to talk.” Arriving at her house in the middle of the night, she ushers him into her bedroom. Eric delicately closes the door and cautiously makes his way to her bedside. He is disheveled and haggard, and sits down at a respectful, if unusual, distance from her, signaling his trepidation at the up-coming conversation. “What’s going on?” Maggie queries. After a long silence where Maggie moves to comfort him, misinterpreting the possible cause of his distress,

Eric ventures stiltedly, "There's something I have to tell you. I can't hold it in anymore." He hangs his head and then glances back down at the bed. He is riddled with shame and fear, "Promise no matter what I say nothing will change between us." His question is naïve yet reflective of what, on some level, he understands as an inevitability. "This is so hard to finally say out loud," he admits. "You can tell me anything," Maggie counters. The camera pans back and forth between them in close up, emphasizing the intensity of the moment, joining them in conversation. Still, the technique isolates each in his or her own personal experience of this crucial moment. After multiple false starts, he confesses, "I think I like guys." Silence imposes itself for a moment when the shocked Maggie finally mutters breathlessly, "What? What do you mean?" "I don't know," Eric replies tremulously, "I don't know what the fuck I am." Maggie turns her head away from him, fixing her eyes upon the floor, a monitoring, kinesic sign for the experience of shame. "Mag," Eric implores, "You're scaring me here," an admission that her silence and shame-filled affect are threatening him. He looks at her intently, as she stares down at the bed, "Tell me I'm not a freak. You're all I have." His solicitation pushes Maggie into her own shameful closet, "Eric, you're my best friend; it doesn't change anything," yet her shifting eyes tell another tale, which Eric will, of course, register, although at her words, he exhales dramatically in a sign of relief. "Thank you," he exhales. "It's Rod, right?" Maggie inquires. "You knew?" Eric ventures with a little more composure, as if feeling seen affirmatively. "No," Maggie responds unconvincingly, shaking her head. "I don't know," she furthers in an expression of what amounts to a sign of willful ignorance. The conversation moves on to discussion about Rod. Eric does not seem to realize how much Maggie is hurting on account of his confession, a manifestation of his own case of willful ignorance. "I need you so bad," he concludes, which reestablishes for Maggie a role she can fulfill, and she sighs and leans forward

to embrace him, restabilizing roles for the time being at least, although, while they are embracing the camera offers close ups of each individually. Eric's mien registers alarm and insecurity, Maggie's disorientation and mourning.

This coming-out scene illustrates effectively the profound sense of shame experienced by all parties involved. Coming out represents a major risk to the gay person who, unable to hold it in any longer, dares to speak the unspeakable, suffering the impact of shame in the very utterance. However, the interlocutor also suffers an inevitable shame, that of loss at the discovery that her prized relationship has been built on false pretense. It is a scene littered with shame on both sides and leaves each desperately searching for a way to maintain a relationship that is devastated by the act.

This intermediate zone, when appearances of normalcy are being maintained in the aftermath of shock, is rife with prevarication, as each party dissimulates his or her true feelings. Eric is now both discredited and discreditable and must therefore maintain a calculated game of impression management. Subsequent scenes illustrate this as Eric announces to his parents that he is going to visit Maggie, who has become his beard, his front to conceal his homosexuality from those for whom he is still discreditable; of course he is actually going to The Universal Fruit and Nut Co. This juggling of two personas, though, is difficult to manage; even as his words maintain the semblance of all being as expected, he wears ever more flamboyant outfits and bolder makeup, which reveal that things are anything but. Suspicions and prevarication will only continue, however, until one or more of the parties involved are no longer willing to maintain the charade at which point conflict will ensue.

Showdown:

With Maggie the culminating moment will occur when Eric invites her to join him at The Universal Fruit and Nut Co. He has overestimated the truthfulness of her acceptance of his homosexuality. She is hesitant to attend as if sensing her limit. Eric, however, naively pressures her to come and in so doing pushes her beyond the threshold of her ability to maintain appearances of acceptance.

When Maggie appears at the bar to meet him, she takes refuge at the bar. Angie espies her and greets her with requisite, friendly camp and pomp. For a moment they embrace, and everything seems poised to play out in a mutually supportable fashion such that all will be able to maintain their respective roles. However, when one of Angie's friends, in a tactless gesture, yells out to Eric, "Hey, Eric, I didn't know you had a fag hag!" the sheer uncouthness pushes Maggie to her limit. Angie censures him, "Shut the fuck up," but it is too late to bring Maggie back from the tipping point. In the background, the Bronski Beat belts out, "Run away, turn away, run away, turn away, run away." Maggie, as if on cue, turns to see Eric dancing with a new paramour on the dancefloor. He and Jonathan exude appropriate chemistry and mutual attraction. Suddenly, Jonathan leans in to kiss him. Maggie is arrested by the no holds barred veracity of the sight. The intense red lighting echoes her own growing pain and frustration. The song urges insistently, "Run, run, run. Run, run, run, run, run." The camera's shot blurs Jonathan and Eric in the foreground, demarcating the left and right extremes of the shot, framing Maggie in between them in the distance, the camera focusing in on her intently; her expression is a mixture of anger, sadness, and unabashed realization. Eric's face turns to see her; she looks at him with the look of one stunned and wounded. Jonathan unwittingly, and yet significantly,



turns Eric's face back to focus on him, which Eric does for but a moment, but the message is clear. Maggie, in her own world at least, feels jilted and betrayed.

The perceived loss of Maggie renders Eric even more vulnerable, and he finds himself fleeing to the campus of Ohio State University. He is searching for Jonathan, but he encounters Rod, who is more than willing to avail himself of Eric's emotionally reduced state. After an evening which culminates in an unfortunate and devastating first experience with anal sex which blurs the lines towards date rape, Eric finds himself slouched over entering the front door of his house, yet another critical showdown will ensue.

"Where were you?" Eric's mother asks crossly, "Answer me." Eric lies. She asks another question. Eric lies. Each lie excites more suspicion. Finally, she proffers exacerbadly, "Eric, something's going on." "What do you mean?" he counters. "Your clothes, the makeup," she answers. "Look, I just want to be different," he replies, to which she answers with flat contempt, "You don't have to look like a freak." Eric does not respond but fixes her with his eyes revealing mounting rage. "Eric, I'm sorry," his mother continues, "I just don't want people getting the wrong idea." "What idea?" he ventures. "They might think..." she halts. "What?" Eric asks more significantly, forcing the showdown. "People think you're gay," she quips. Eric huffs, "Is that what you want to know?" He pauses, "Well I'm not. What the hell is wrong with you?" He storms out the front door leaving his closet momentarily intact but the situation more confused than ever.

He takes refuge at Angie's cottage by the lake. They sit on her porch, and Eric laments, "I feel lousy." Angie responds, leaning into him intimately, as a family member might. The camera focuses on her with a close up as her voice and demeanor communicate that all camp is

off; honestly will be offered, “You know, your whole life people have said to you you’re going to find the perfect girl, and fall in love, and get married, produce an heir.” Her gaze settles on him meaningfully as she continues simply, “You’re different.” She smiles at him gently, “You just have to accept that it’s ok to want another guy.” The camera pans to a close up of Eric who is listening intently but with veiled emotion. “And, lovey,” she continues, “that takes time. Just give yourself a little time.” Although he leans into her for an embrace, his head is shaking no, while his face is hardened; he is at a crossroads. Angela’s words frame his heterosexist dilemma. Even though active participation in religion does not seem to play an overbearing role, the heterosexist assumption is enough to produce what feel like impossible barriers.

The scene shifts to Eric sat on his bedroom floor, looking at a framed photograph of him and Maggie from their summer working together at the amusement park. Framing the image renders it more formal and even risks giving it an historical feel, as if cataloguing a piece of his past, cherished but no more. As he does so, his youngest brother enters, “Hey,” he queries as he picks up the photograph of his brother with Maggie, “is Maggie your girlfriend?” The question itself, in a moment that epitomizes the expression, “from the mouths of babes,” reveals the totality of the heterosexist bind that is strangling Eric; there is no one to whom he will not have to come out; no relationship is safe from the threat of shame, for even his youngest brother has already internalized the informal message of the heterosexist culture that surrounds him.

Eric spirals into his avoidance script with vehemence. He asks Maggie to meet him at the diner to share an ice-cream, a sign of their past relationship. She arrives late, signaling indifferent contempt and exasperation. Determined, however, he convinces her that his true affections are for her. “I can’t have what I want with a guy,” Eric states, perhaps revealing a misunderstanding he has derived from his ill-fated evening with Rod, “I want to try. I want to

make this work.” “I don’t think it should be that much work,” Maggie counters in a moment of unfiltered honesty. As the conversation continues, though, she asks, “Do you think that, if you hadn’t met Rod, you would have been with me?” Eric replies instantly, “Maggie, I love you.” “But,” she counters, “do you love me like..?” “Like that, yeah,” Eric finishes her question for her, “Yes, I love you like that.” His assertion echoes André Gide’s *Corydon*, “Je l’aimais trop pour me rendre nettement compte que je ne la désirais pas” (23),<sup>25</sup> and in so doing he sets the stage for what will be the final dissolution of their relationship and the unravelling of his heterosexual façade on all fronts.

The next morning we find them postcoitally cuddling in bed. Maggie is asleep on his chest, and he is staring up at the ceiling. The high angle shot emphasizes the vulnerability of the situation as a tear exudes from his eye to flow down his cheek. Downstairs, his mother prepares to leave for a shift at the restaurant, a job she has taken to be able to send Eric to New York for university. As she reaches for her jacket, she knocks his from its peg. Out falls a pack of matches advertising The Universal Fruit and Nut Co. The stage is set.

Upstairs, Maggie wakes to find Eric crying. “Eric, what?” she ventures, but he can say nothing. Finally he begins to utter, “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry” an implied admission that they have no sexual future. Suddenly, his mother bursts into the room, ready for a fight, only to falter at the sight of him in bed with Maggie. She turns and flees the room. Maggie bounds from the bed to dress, “Eric, can you just get out of my life.” Eric wants to stop her, but his mother charges in, “Why am I killing myself? Do you think I’m having fun? This is for you,” she proclaims as she points to the uniform she is wearing. “You can just forget about New York. I quit!” She draws from her pocket the matchbox she had found and shows it to him.

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<sup>25</sup> “I loved her too much to realize squarely that I did not desire her.”

He takes it, “No, no, no, I don’t go here. I don’t go here anymore. I don’t.” His mother leans in with crossed arms and menacing mien, “Tell me what the hell is going on.” Eric falters, finds no words; he clumsily gathers his things and pushes past her, uttering in sobs, “I can’t!”

He goes to the lake to sit on the jetties. The setting, in its immensity, reflects his need to make a major life decision and to find peace within. Across the lake, rises up the image of the amusement park where the critical encounters were made which catalyzed his transformation. He has reached the point of crisis. On the one hand, he has overtaxed his relationship with Maggie to a point of no return; this all-important crutch has been lost. On the other hand, he has seen the conditional quality of his mother’s love for him. She will go back to work, even willingly, for a heterosexual son, but she will not sacrifice for a homosexual. There is no room in her life for a gay child. Eric is doubly bound.

#### Disintegration and Rebirth:

When Eric returns home his father and brothers are just leaving for the movies apparently oblivious to the situation. Eric’s mother has not told her husband that their child is gay, reinforcing Eric’s closet and eventuating her own in the face of the shame she now bears as the mother of a homosexual child. He finds her playing the piano, and he watches her at length, taking in the vision of his mother making music, an image that he cherishes. Finally, they begin to speak, “Mom, I’ve been sitting around all day trying to decide whether to tell you that this is just a phase or to tell you the truth.” Eric is clenching and releasing his hands in a sign of heightened distress. He speaks breathlessly as if each syllable were dangerous. His mother sits in silence, fixing the floor with her gaze, registering shame. Eric begs, “Mom, please look at

me.” She only hangs her head further. Eric falters for a moment, and diverts his gaze, feeling shame deeply, but he musters his courage again, “Mom, I’m gay.” She hesitates for long moments, but finally turns to face him; “I know,” she says softly with resignation. She gets up to embrace him, and he falls into his mother’s arms, beginning to sob quietly. “Oh, little boy,” she pleads, “What did I do wrong?” breaking into her own tears. “Nothing,” Eric replies. Then, her eyes seem to register a kind of sudden awareness, and she withdraws from his embrace. She finds nothing more to say to him, and turns to walk away. “Mom,” he calls after her. She turns wringing her fingers, “I don’t know how to handle this.” “I love you,” he responds with surety. Finding no words, she turns and walks away, abandoning her child.

A brief hallway scene at their school shows Eric and Maggie at their respective lockers. They glance at each other, but then Maggie turns to walk away. Their interpersonal bridge is soundly severed; the relationship is no more.

A shower scene ensues. The background music is soft yet intense almost waiting for resolution. The water pours over Eric’s face, washing him clean, freeing him from the soil of these failed relationships.

Then, as the music intensifies, becoming more excited, we see him donning his new gay duds. The image is hopeful. Will he escape the double bind? Will he make it out, not unscathed, but at least safely? Will there be life for him after his loss of friendship and that of his family? Will he return to the gay community he has been avoiding? Will it still be safe there? He dons his hat and assesses himself in the mirror.

The scene shifts suddenly to a flamboyant drag queen dressed in red. Angie joins her on the stage amidst applause. The drag queen retracts herself, leaving Angie alone in front of the

crowd. Slowly the camera turns to see Eric making his way into the room to join his friends at the bar. Angie announces that she will do one more song before the end of the show, but then she looks up and sees Eric making his way through the crowd. Taken aback for a moment at the sight of him, she hesitates and then says, “And I’m going to dedicate it to my good friend, Eric,” who blows her a kiss. The music begins, “Blue skies smiling at me, nothing but blue skies do I see.” At the sound of his name, his friends turn to see him standing before them, and they draw him instantly into their circle, showering him with affection and affirmation. Angie continues, “Never saw the sun shining so bright, never saw things going so right. Noticing the days hurrying by, when you’re in love, my, my, how they fly.” As if on cue, Jonathan approaches. Eric is speechless with astonishment and disbelief; then they embrace with ardor. Eric feebly mutters, “Oh my God,” taking in the image of this man with whom we know he will fall in love, and Jonathan answers, “You look great.” They gaze at each other for one more moment, registering that they are, indeed, together; then they turn back to Angie who belts out triumphantly, “Blue skies, smiling at me. Nothing but those blue skies do I see.” Eric erupts with shouts and applause, his face joyful. As the camera fades to black, Angie’s voice promises, “Nothing but blue skies for now on. Blue skies.”

It is the mid-80’s in the American Midwest. Homophobia is ubiquitous, and heterosexism is the rule. Although the setting is contemporaneous to that of *Doña Herlinda y su Hijo*, that of *Edge of Seventeen* brings us a scenario with two important variations. Firstly, unlike in *Doña Herlinda y su Hijo*, the family is not going to pretend not to notice Eric’s homosexuality. This alone is enough to undermine the stability of his closet. Rodolfo and Ramón survive on a level of tacit tactfulness maintained by all involved. Moreover, they are careful not to exhibit cultural cues and behaviors which would obviously undermine their public

appearance. Eric, perhaps on account of his youthfulness and inexperience, or via difference in local, does not maintain a physical appearance which complements his identity assertion, rendering the maintenance of a tactful closet more challenging. Secondly, unlike in *Doña Herlinda* where Rodolfo and Ramón seem relatively isolated from other homosexuals, Eric, through a series of critical encounters, develops an entire social sphere based in a secure hub of peers who offer him the kind of personal affirmation which he craves. These encounters do much to force a rupture of the cultural bind by which his social mobility is restricted.

This gay hub, though, comes at a cost. His former heterosexist identity and social structure are lost. There are yet few pressures being exerted on the heterosexual culture of the time to force a broadening of the conception of acceptable sexuality; to the contrary, there is, in the conservative political ambience of the Regan administration, much to bolster a homophobic attitude and one of willful ignorance toward the needs of homosexuals, even with regards to gay and lesbian family members.

Eric does not so much challenge the homosexual hegemony as abandon it. There is an open door and a closed door, and he chooses to pass through the open door. There he finds an entire sub-culture replete with pageantry and excitement ready to accept him as he is and enjoy him. Unlike Rodolfo, faced with the alternative of living in the closet, entering into a sham marriage, and stifling his very self, Eric leaves everything and begins something new.

Historically, we know that history did not long tolerate this division once more and more gay men and lesbians began to come out of the closet. The dire conditions of the AIDS epidemic, new understandings in social psychology, and an ever growing population of out homosexuals who were less and less comfortable simply repairing to their gay ghettos and who

wanted to enjoy more of the benefits of full participation in society, would lead to the powerful momentum of the gay rights movement which only strengthened at the end of the 80's and into the 90's.

The New York-based organization Act Up became a role model of strong rebellion. Their mantra, "Silence = Death," became a virulent warning not to hide in the shadows but to push the political bar with overt effort. We were not only warned but also taught by Act UP as well as by other organizations such as the Human Rights Campaign, PFLAG, et al. that as a community it was our responsibility, for our good and the good of our community, to come out of the closet and demand equal treatment. On the local, state, and national level, we began to make significant noise.

The internet gave unprecedented ability to communicate to the broader gay culture. As a community, we began to use the internet to fuel each other's courage, sound the collective alarm, and give the call to arms. The news of outrages as well as victories cemented the community across the globe, and the month of June came to find Gay Pride celebrations in the cities around the world.

"We're here, we're queer, get used to it, don't fuck with us!" became a widespread rallying mantra. Early on academia internationally became sensitive to the needs of the LGBT community. Women's studies departments, literature departments, among many others became safe zones for LGBT students who therein would be trained in self-respect and gifted a sense of self as defensible and worthy of esteem. The graduates of these institutions would enter the workforce and political life with a transformed understanding of the value of LGBT members of



society, and like the other members of their generation would enjoy a sense of entitlement, that they simply had a right to be.

The far reaching effects of these many fronted movements transformed the act of coming out away from the isolating act we've explored thus far into a major political statement of human dignity, which by the end of the millennium had already began to set the barometer ever higher for expectations of freedom and acceptance by the wider, hitherto heterosexist society. It is here that we pick back up our look into the function of the closet as the expression of homosexual taboo. In our next film, the players will no longer find it sufficient to escape the bind. Instead, they will move against it in a move to uproot it and in so doing undermine the very state of the heterosexist assumption.

## Chapter VI: *Juste une question d'amour*—Confronting the Bind, Changing the Rules

In Christian Faure's 2000 film, *Juste une question d'amour*, we will encounter Laurent, a young gay man whose bound situation will quickly spiral into an acute double-bind. On the one side, Laurent's extremely conservative family will create an environment in which a gay son cannot feel safe, incentivizing a closeted existence. However, a critical encounter with Cédric, an undeniable love match, and his accepting, loving mother will render Laurent's closet untenable. Moreover, caught in the crossfire will be Carole, Laurent's heterosexual alibi who will tire of the charade and her uncertain place in the unfurling of events.

### The Façade and the Shame:

The first image of the film is that of looking through the spaces in between Laurent's fingers as his hands cover his eyes. He, as if her uncle, is playing hide and go seek with his young cousin Marine; he covers his face whilst she hides, spying on her as he runs about. For us, though, it is a potent metaphor covering the many struggles with which Laurent contends. The fingers are like prison bars, his conservative family, that enclose him. They are his closet, at once a jail and a place to hide. They shield his eyes and face as one hiding from the specter of terror, and they give the impression of one that is playing by the rule, but who in reality is cheating, using appearances to control the situation and watch those around him.

The hands, opening like a theater curtain, reveal an idyllic scene of the traditional family gathered for Sunday dinner. Laurent is there at his family's home. His mother, Jeanne, prepares

the table with his aunt Martine. His cousin Noëlle watches as he runs around the lawn with her daughter Marine. As he spins her around, Marine commands, “Arrête! Tu me fais tourner la tête!”<sup>26</sup> Laurent’s friend Carole chimes in, “Et les hommes, ça sert à ça, ma puce,”<sup>27</sup> foreshadowing her own relationship with Laurent. Aunt Marine, in the first sign that all is perhaps not wholly perfect in the family, uses this opportunity to scold her son-in-law Didier, pointing out that Laurent has no problem playing with Didier’s daughter, “Vous voyez, Didier, qu’on peut s’amuser avec Marine.”<sup>28</sup> The implication that Didier is sexist and neglectful of his daughter is clear. Martine’s face is noticeably without mirth, and the comment is all the more frigid with the insistent, bourgeois use of *vous* in addressing him. Her daughter Noëlle is quick to come to her husband’s defense, “Arrête, Mamman! Ton gendre voulait tellement avoir un garçon.”<sup>29</sup> Laurent’s mother Jeanne adds with surprise, “Ah, bon, encore aujourd’hui?”<sup>30</sup> Herewith, Jeanne makes pretensions to progressiveness that she will herself soon be proven to lack. Didier is quick to respond, “Il y a des moments je me sens un peu seul au milieu de toutes ces femmes.”<sup>31</sup> When Jeanne reminds that it is not too late to have more children, Noëlle is quick to squelch the idea. She goes on to jest, “C’est Laurent que j’aurais dû épouser,”<sup>32</sup> as she

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<sup>26</sup> “Stop! You’re making me dizzy!”

<sup>27</sup> “That’s what men do, my dear.”

<sup>28</sup> “You see, Didier, one can have fun with Marine.”

<sup>29</sup> “Stop, Mom! Your son-in-law so wanted to have a son.”

<sup>30</sup> “really, even nowadays.”

<sup>31</sup> “There are times when I feel a bit lonely surrounded by all these women.”

<sup>32</sup> “I should have married Laurent.”

watches him play with Marine. “C’est vrai,” replies Jeanne, “Il sera un père extraordinaire,”<sup>33</sup> She stands tall, her face beaming with pride ; “Oui!”<sup>34</sup> she muses.

The scene shifts on cue to the kitchen as Laurent’s hands reach in to extract the piping hot lamb shank from the oven. He feigns being burned to get a rise out of his mother then grins. Carole saunters into the kitchen to take over the work with Laurent and send Jeanne out to relax. “Vous êtes des anges,”<sup>35</sup> she coos and slips away. “C’est vrai qu’on est des anges. Hein, mon Lolo? Et comme les anges on ne sait pas très bien quel est l’autre sexe,”<sup>36</sup> she playfully chides, but we understand that between them all is not what it appears.

Outside, the family watches Laurent and Carole goof around in the kitchen, and Laurent’s parents extol her. His uncle is pleased with her. Aunt Martine, however, pops a pill and comments almost without affect, “J’suis contente pour vous. On avait peur que Laurent n’amène jamais de fille, lui aussi.”<sup>37</sup> The comment connects with Carole’s remark to Laurent in the kitchen and peaks our curiosity. It also adds the question of who is this other, unnamed and yet alluded to, who, to the obvious chagrin of his parents, never brought, or brings, a girl home. The scene of the conversation between Laurent’s parents and those of Noëlle is composed of two-shots in close up of the couples, husband and wife, sat side by side, the camera panning back and forth between them. The effect is to stress the closeness of their relationship and the easy flow of conversation between them, yet the speed of the camera’s movement adds undertones of stress

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<sup>33</sup> “It’s true. He will be an extraordinary father.”

<sup>34</sup> “Yes!”

<sup>35</sup> “You are angels.”

<sup>36</sup> It’s true we’re angels. Huh, Lolo? And like the angles we don’t really know which is the other sex.”

<sup>37</sup> “I’m happy for you. We were afraid that Laurent would never bring a girl over either.”

the cause of which is not yet clear, although doubts concerning sexuality are fairly easy to infer. As Laurent and Carole arrive with the rest of the meal and take their seats, the camera settles for one final wide-shot, taking in the whole family, happy and hungry, ready to eat.

The scene brings us to the postprandial kitchen where Noëlle takes the dishes from Laurent's hands, "Là, je vais les faire."<sup>38</sup> Laurent chides that he thought her fully emancipated to which she retorts, "Et toi, ça t'amuse de jouer au fils parfait?"<sup>39</sup> Laurent acknowledges, "Là, tu sais très bien que c'est mon rôle préféré ça, surtout dans une famille aussi parfaite."<sup>40</sup> He turns and walks to the kitchen door, looking out on the yard; his face is marked with signs of scorn. "Regarde-les. Des tueurs parfaits dans un monde parfait. Impossible de savoir où ils ont planqué le canard."<sup>41</sup> The camera focuses out onto the family in a long shot that suggests we study them as a tribe or as specimens as they rise from the table to cross the bridge and walk in the garden. "Laurent, s'il te plaît,"<sup>42</sup> Noëlle pleads. "Ah, oui, t'as raison. Taisons! Après tout ce qui se passe, ce n'est pas si un mystère que Marc est mort,"<sup>43</sup> Laurent responds, giving a name to the aforementioned, unnamed disappointment. Noëlle quickly tries to negate his statement. We learn Marc's parents kicked him out of the house. Noëlle urges, "Mes-toi un peu à la place de nos parents."<sup>44</sup> "Non, merci! C'est trop dégueulasse!"<sup>45</sup> Noëlle barks from the kitchen sink,

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<sup>38</sup> "Hey, I'll do them."

<sup>39</sup> "And are you having fun playing the perfect son?"

<sup>40</sup> "Well, you know it's my favorite role, especially in such a perfect family."

<sup>41</sup> "Look at them. Perfect killers in a perfect world. It's impossible to know where they stashed the body."

<sup>42</sup> "Laurent, please."

<sup>43</sup> "Oh, yes, Let's keep quiet. After everything that happens, it's not such a mystery that Marc died."

<sup>44</sup> "Put yourself for a moment in our parents' shoes."

while Laurent continues to look out at their family in the garden, “Ah, oui, c’est ça, ‘Famille, je vous hais!’ ”<sup>46</sup> “Mais non, même pas,”<sup>47</sup> Marc responds as the camera zooms in for a close up of his face, removing Noëlle from the dialogue; he mutters in hushed tones, “Pourtant ce serait tellement plus simple de ne plus les voir.”<sup>48</sup>

The scene shift flashes to Martine with her back to the camera. She is alone in the center of the frame. Her husband Georges’ voice relates in the background that she is going to see a psychologist. He had insisted. Since Marc’s death he no longer understands her. Marine cries out to her joyfully, and Martine scoops her into her arms. She holds her granddaughter tightly in an embrace, and for the first time we see her smile.

The frame shifts to Georges and Laurent’s father Pierre in two-shot. Their faces are stern and contemplative. Georges continues, “Au départ c’est elle qui ne voulait plus voir Marc et puis après elle me le reprochait en disant que c’était pour me faire plaisir.”<sup>49</sup> He goes on, “L’idée que deux hommes, en plus, se toucher, se tripoter comme ça, je peux pas. Putain! Ça me...ça me dégoûte.”<sup>50</sup> Pierre vigorously nods his agreement with disgusted mien, “Ouais,”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> “No thank you; it’s too disgusting.”

<sup>46</sup> “That’s right, there you go, ‘Family, I hate you.’ ”

<sup>47</sup> “No, not even.”

<sup>48</sup> “However, it would so much simpler to no longer see them.”

<sup>49</sup> At first it was she who didn’t want to see Marc anymore, but then after she blamed me saying that it had only been to please me.”

<sup>50</sup> “The idea of two men, moreover, touching each other, fondling each other like that, I can’t. Fuck, it...it disgusts me!”

<sup>51</sup> “Yeah.”

then he adds, “Et que ton propre fils fasse ça...”<sup>52</sup> Georges interrupts, “Quand ça t’arrive c’est plus ton fils.”<sup>53</sup>

The depth of the bind and its far-reaching implications are meticulously laid out through a series of scenes which dress the frame in a quasi-bucolic blush and yet reveals that underneath the veneer of consummate conservative values there lies a profound family tragedy that undermines one relationship after another. It is a wedge between Martine and Georges. Martine appears moments away from a *bona fide* nervous breakdown. Laurent and Noëlle take different stances. Laurent sees his whole family through a pale of disgust. We understand that his presentation *en famille* is a dramaturgical farce, yet we’re not sure why. Most importantly, we learn that the defunct Marc was gay, and that his parents, both mother and father, rejected him completely, expelled him from the house, and cut him off. We see that, in the wake of his unexplained death, guilt is consuming Martine. In spite of the blow of the loss of his own son, Georges’ hatred and contempt for gay men continues unscathed. His words, reserved for conversation between men, are uncharacteristically vulgar for the otherwise totally bourgeois setting, revealing the unrepentant rawness of his disgust.

Laurent observes them all from afar, and we remember the original frame, the prison of his gaze through hands covering his face, his fingers like ensnaring bars. He is trapped, frightened, angry, even of contemptuous attitude toward this his family, and yet, by his own admission, he is unable to hate them. He stands suspect, and now, after the explanation of Marc’s demise and the fury with which his sexuality was greeted, we understand Martine’s

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<sup>52</sup> “And that your own son does it.”

<sup>53</sup> “When it happens to you, he’s not your son any longer.”

presaging confession, “On avait peur que Laurent n’amène jamais de fille, lui aussi.”<sup>54</sup>

However, is the prophecy so misplaced?

The Reality:

As Carole and Laurent get into their car and drive off, their shared rant reveals the truth of Laurent’s frustrating relationship to his family. His father disapproves of him. He is having troubles in school. His father is overly concerned with what others might say or perceive concerning his family. Mostly we understand that the imprisoning hands, indeed, do represent Laurent’s relationship to his family, their departure resembles that of one fleeing the scene.

From the lovely countryside, they arrive at an industrial park. The two unexpectedly are working as janitors. The camera flashes between them, following them as they speed about the office, accentuating the nature of their hurried movements. It frames them individually, emphasizing their argument, that they hold differing opinions. Carole quips, “Si mon père était pharmacien, je te jure que je ne serais pas là à vider des poubelles.”<sup>55</sup> “C’est le prix de mon indépendance, ma vieille,”<sup>56</sup> replies Laurent. “C’est surtout le prix de ton silence,”<sup>57</sup> retorts

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<sup>54</sup> “We were afraid that Laurent would never bring a girl over either.”

<sup>55</sup> “If my father were a pharmacist, I swear that I would not be here emptying trashcans.”

<sup>56</sup> “It’s the price of my independence, my dear.”

<sup>57</sup> “Above all, it is the price of your silence.”



Carole, “Joue pas au petit orphelin, Lolo. Tes parents sont pas cons. S’ils savaient pour toi, ils te foutaient pas à la porte.”<sup>58</sup> The camera settles on Laurent’s disappointed face, “Pas si sûr.”<sup>59</sup>

Finally, upon their return to their apartment, do we receive confirmation of our suspicions; Laurent’s room is plastered with pictures of men. Laurent is gay, and he is a member of an extremely, even violently, homophobic family, which has already expelled one member for the same crime of nature. Marc being dead and apparently mourned by his guilt-ridden mother alone, Laurent understandably has no confidence in the love of his parents or in the integrity of his family. He thinks of them as murderers, murderers whom he loves, yet murderers nonetheless, and fears himself the next potential victim of their unyielding contempt for those as he can be proven to be.

Laurent, then, is discreditable, and he manages his life in carefully segregated zones. He goes to school far from the probing, homophobic eyes of his family in Walincourt. Against the bourgeois expectation, he works to pay his rent independently instead of relying on his parents; thus, he keeps their expectations at bay. Carole, his friend and beard, plays the doting girlfriend in Walincourt and the fag hag at university. He is bound, but his bind seems stable. In spite of his family’s crimes against his cousin Marc, he continues to love them. His defensive script is that of the perfect son, and if not content, he seems to be resigned to playing the role indefinitely.

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<sup>58</sup> “Don’t play the future orphan, Lolo. You’re parents are not idiots. If they knew about you, they wouldn’t kick you the fuck out.”

<sup>59</sup> “Not so sure.”

## The Bind Reinforced from Within and Without:

When the phone rings, it is Alain, Marc's boyfriend; Laurent makes plans to meet him. When Carole inquires as to who it might be, Laurent demurs which renders Carole cross. When Laurent finally explains who it is and that it is not a boyfriend, she responds, "Pourquoi tu l'as pas dit plus tôt? Tu vois, c'est ça ce qui est chiant avec toi. Tu veux rien partager."<sup>60</sup> The statement is telling, insofar as it illustrates the extreme extent to which Laurent compartmentalizes his life in order to ensure the manageability and balance of his closet. Although it may at first appear that Carole is his closest confidant, we soon discover that it is actually Alain.

When Laurent finds Alain at the Japanese restaurant which is to be their meeting spot and, we learn, an old haunt of Alain and Marc, he is busy correcting parents and getting drunk on sake. He is older than Laurent but not his parents' age, somewhere in between, and in his eyes is sadness. They decide to go for a stroll. In reference to his family Laurent explains, "Attends, j'hallucine comme ils continuent à faire semblant que Marc n'avait jamais existé."<sup>61</sup> "Ça t'étonne?" Alain replies, "Quand j'ai appelé à ton oncle pour lui dire que Marc n'avait que quelques jours à vivre, la seule chose qu'il m'avait répondu c'est, 'Mais il y a une justice avec le sida pour des gens comme vous.'"<sup>62</sup> Such a statement reveals the sheer force of formal culture at work in Laurent's family. It is enforced by the weight of taboo and enhanced with potent contempt. This extraordinary shame will work against Laurent both as a doubling of the

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<sup>60</sup> "Why didn't you say so earlier. You see, that's what's annoying about you; you don't want to share anything."

<sup>61</sup> "Listen, I can't get over how they continue to pretend that Marc never existed."

<sup>62</sup> "When I called your uncle to tell him that Marc had but a few days to live, the only thing he answered was, 'There is justice in AIDS for people like you.' "

emotional anguish he already suffers on account of Marc's loss but also as a paralyzing reminder of his own credibly potential fate should he out himself or be outed to his family.

As Alain continues, we learn that Marc did not die of AIDS but rather of a random case of contracted hepatitis. Georges had simply assumed that Marc's death was due to AIDS. The assumption reinforces the formal taboo belief, which of course is accentuated by contempt, that deviance deserves its punishment. Underlying this apparently inhumane behavior is the effect of perceived stigma on the moral compass of the one levying the stigma, "By definition, of course, we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human. On this assumption, we exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively, if often unthinkingly, reduce his life chances. We construct a stigma-theory, an ideology to explain his inferiority and account for the danger it represents [...]" (Goffman 5). Georges himself is so bound by his credence in the righteousness of the formal homosexual taboo that he ceases to see his son as a full participant in humanity which facilitates the quick condemnation and rejection. Moreover, the paracommunicative reduction of his son to "less than human" alleviates the threat of the punitive potential for reciprocating shame which would otherwise be formally suitable for such condescending treatment of a human equal, especially of one's own child. Formal culture justifies and buffers itself.

Still submitting to the bind, Laurent offers, "Marc, il était con, quoi. Il n'aurait jamais dû leur dire qu'il été pédé."<sup>63</sup> His pronouncement accepts the righteousness of the bind, and the utterance of acceptance enforces the shame. Alain, struck by the potential harm in the statement,

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<sup>63</sup> "Marc was an idiot. He never should have told them that he was a fag."

responds defensively, “Pourquoi? C’est une honte?!”<sup>64</sup> The moment pits the one against the other for an awkward moment before Alain excuses himself, “Excuse-moi, c’est pas ce que je voulais dire. C’est vrai qu’avec des cons pareils ça sert à rien d’en parler.”<sup>65</sup> The statement removes any tension between them, but it also establishes a conflicting formal stance; i.e., bigots such as Laurent’s relatives are “*cons*,” idiots, ergo deserving of the same dehumanizing, paracommunicative reduction. Laurent effectively is portrayed as existing in two powerfully contradictory social spheres, each condemning the other with dehumanizing contempt, each seeing the other as hopelessly inferior. As they walk, lining the sidewalk is a wall thick with graffiti and pornographic posters advertising both heterosexual and homosexual pleasures; each type is displayed in more or less equal quantity, contradicting the claims of either to any feigned ontological sanctity.

Several scenes later, we see Laurent called to the hospital, for his father has gravely hurt himself. Jeanne and Laurent are terrified at the prospect of losing their husband and father respectively. When Pierre is cleared by the doctors and they are allowed to go in to see him, Laurent collapses upon his father’s breast in innocent, puerile abandon. It becomes clear, thus, that although Laurent resents his parents powerfully for their rejection of Marc and the conditional love which they offer him, he himself clearly loves his parents in spite of their perceived faults. There is nothing apparently morbid in this attachment, but one we might risk to call the natural, filial attachment of child to parent. It does, however, make clear that Laurent is powerfully bound by their unacceptance of him, for he can neither be fully with them nor fully without them.

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<sup>64</sup> “Why? Is it a shame?!”

<sup>65</sup> “I’m sorry; it’s not what I meant. It’s true that with idiots like them it’s not even worth talking about it.”

The scene of their post-accident reunion of the family is so touching as to make one almost forget the deep rift which divides them, but when Jeanne and Laurent once again return to the waiting room, where they are joined by Georges, a chance encounter reopens the wound of division between them. Recognizing Laurent, the nurse that tended to Marc up until his passing happens by. She approaches and greets him with mirth and kindness. Laurent, upon seeing her, responds in kind. When she then makes her way down the hallway, Laurent's face hardens and he informs, "C'est l'infirmière qui s'est occupée de Marc...jusqu'au bout."<sup>66</sup> The three, sat in a row, stare forward. There is heavy silence as we view them in isolating profile; together, they are alone. Finally Georges with defeated mien and pleading mingled with clinging conviction responds, "Laurent, Marc n'est pas mort à cause de nous."<sup>67</sup> "Vous auriez pu venir le voir,"<sup>68</sup> Laurent retorts. However, Jeanne inserts with definitive and condescending finality, "Quand on est comme Marc il vaut mieux se taire. S'il avait rien dit, on aurait rien su, et personne ne l'aurait rejeté."<sup>69</sup>

The pronouncement reasserts the rules of the homosexual bind. They are the rules by which Rodolfo and Ramón in *Doña Herlinda y su Hijo* choose to live as discreditable and those which Eric in *Edge of Seventeen* chooses to reject as discredited at the expense of his family ties. They are the crossroads at which Laurent stands. Marc, discredited, was rejected completely by the elders of his family and died without his parents beside him. Laurent, terrified by the specter

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<sup>66</sup> "That's the nurse who took care of Marc...up until the end."

<sup>67</sup> "Laurent, Marc did not die because of us."

<sup>68</sup> "You could have come to see him."

<sup>69</sup> "When one is like Marc, it is best to keep quit. If he had said nothing, we would have known nothing, and no one would have rejected him."

of rejection, labors to maintain his closet, choosing to remain discreditable in order not to suffer the same familial contempt, which his mother unknowingly lays so harshly before him.

#### The Critical Encounter and the Eventuation of the Double Bind:

When Laurent first sees Cédric on campus he is arrested. The camera focuses in on Laurent's face and eyes which gleam with excitement and enjoyment. His lips curl in subtle grin. The movement of the camera from right to left, drawing exaggerated attention to Laurent's mien, mimics the path that Cédric walks as well as the whimsical dizziness which Laurent feels in what amounts to a moment of love at first sight. With Carole prophetically blurred in the background, he mutters, "Putain! Il est cannon!"<sup>70</sup>

Later, when Laurent is assigned to an internship in a last ditch effort to save his floundering academic career, he is once again shocked to find himself assigned to be Cédric's assistant at his nursery and research lab located off campus. Their relationship is charged from the start. At the center is a foreshadowing unwillingness on Cédric's part to abide Laurent's avoidance-based defensive scripts. Although at first it appears that their relationship will be truncated by this interpersonal conflict, Laurent, at the urging of Alain, steps out of his protective shell and commits to the internship.

As their time together progresses, Emma, Cédric's mother, invites Laurent to join them for supper, an invitation which he accepts. The conversation becomes personal, and Cédric speaks of his late father, revealing his strong commitment to his memory. The exchange of such

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<sup>70</sup> "Fuck! He's hot!"

personal information deepens the connection between them. When it is time for Laurent to leave to report to his janitorial job in the industrial zone, Cédric offers to drive him. Their conversation has at this point become jovial. Once arrived at the office building, Laurent asks Cédric for a cigarette, and the two settle in to smoke together. When Cédric offers to light Laurent's cigarette, Laurent guides his zippo-wielding hand towards his lips. The flame flickers in the darkness and reflects in Cédric's eyes which watch Laurent intently. However, when Laurent's hands linger a moment too long on Cédric's without Cédric making any move to pull away, the intensity of the moment strikes Laurent who flees from the vehicle with a tense, "Excuse-moi."<sup>71</sup>

When after their shift Carole and Laurent emerge from the office building, they find Cédric waiting for Laurent. What was to be an evening between the two friends becomes a date between Cédric and Laurent, as Carole slips away under false pretense, leaving the two to go for a drink on their own. The switch is significant pointing to the new pair that is Cédric and Laurent.

When the next morning finds the two in Cédric's bed, the potential for a romantic scene is curtailed by the arrival of Emma at Cédric's door. In a full-front shot she is visibly shocked to find Laurent in her son's bed, and Laurent, in a vulnerable high angle shot, is properly mortified. Cédric, however, does not so much as roll over to greet her. Surprised she quips, "Excusez-moi."

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<sup>71</sup> "Sorry."

Dans certains cas tu pourrais fermer ta porte à clef quand même.”<sup>72</sup> Cédric responds presagefully, “Tu serais capable de la défoncer.”<sup>73</sup>

When they join her in the kitchen for breakfast, Cédric excuses himself. Laurent, left with Emma, is visibly ill at ease. She serves him, but as they sit together, Lauren hangs his head, “Tu n’ose pas me regarder?” she questions, “Regarde-moi, Laurent.”<sup>74</sup> When he looks up, Emma reassures him and begins to explain how she came to accept her son as a gay child. At his father’s funeral Cédric had turned to her and announced, “Mamman, je préfère les garçons; c’est à prendre ou à laisser.” The weight of the confession and Cédric’s surety had left her no choice but to find a way to accept him for who he was. “Je te dis ça parce que tu n’as pas besoin d’avoir peur de moi.”<sup>75</sup> The reassurance is contradictory to Laurent’s prior experiences, and although speechless, he looks at her with smiling eyes. A kind of healing has begun.

Over the course of the next scenes, we witness a transformation in Laurent who melts into his relationship with Cédric and, by force of space, with Emma. They are playful and collaborate. Laurent takes his position at the nursery seriously offering professional customer service to visiting customers. Laurent even begins to prepare their meals with comically questionable levels of success. Indeed, the new acceptance and emotional stability which Laurent enjoys leads to scholastic success, and he passes his diploma in agronomy. Destined to stay on both professionally and romantically with Cédric, we find him transformed, wearing the

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<sup>72</sup> “Excuse me. On certain occasions you could lock your door at least.”

<sup>73</sup> “You’d be able to break it down.”

<sup>74</sup> “You don’t dare look at me? Look at me, Laurent”

<sup>75</sup> “I tell you this because you need not be afraid of me.”



requisite, white, scientist's smock working alongside his beau, but exterior realities will not be ignored.

#### The Double Bind:

Eventually the passing of time urges Laurent to go see his family. However, the rules of his discreditable closet do not permit Cédric to accompany him. Cédric, who lives his life with such openness, especially among family, is nonplused by the sensation of being forced back into the closet of homosexual shame. The tension builds into an argument which borderlines on a breakup scene, yet Cédric pursues Laurent as he moves to leave. Trapped by Cédric who takes hold of him, barring his path, Laurent explodes with shame-filled rage, "Mais, merde! Fous-moi la paix. Ça t'emmerde autant que ça que j'essaie d'être heureux, c'est ça?"<sup>76</sup> Unable to contain himself, Laurent confesses, "C'est à cause de conneries comme ça que mon cousin, il est passé. Ses parents l'ont foutu dehors comme une merde et ils l'ont laissé crevé. Et mes vieux ils ont pas bougé leur petit doigt; ils ont rien fait, comme si tout était normal."<sup>77</sup> The explosion represents the first full bout of honesty with Cédric concerning Laurent's family. His face is strained and pained. His look is desperate and denuded. At the mention of his own parents, the camera shifts from an intense close up of his face to a view of their dispute reflected in the panes of a greenhouse window, and between the two is a metal bar, a metaphor for the barrier that his

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<sup>76</sup> "Shit! Leave me the fuck alone. It pisses you off so much that I try to be happy, it that it?"

<sup>77</sup> "It's because of stupid shit like this that my cousin is dead. His parents threw him out like a piece of shit, and they let him die. And my folks didn't lift a finger; they did nothing, as if all were normal."

parents' bigotry imposes between their son and his lover. When Laurent finishes, he turns to leave, yet Cédric follows and queries with gentle tones, "C'est quoi cette histoire?"<sup>78</sup>

The camera shifts to a close up of Alain's matter-of-fact expression in the familiar Japanese restaurant, "Une histoire vraie, hélas."<sup>79</sup> The camera shifts to a close up of Laurent across from him who hangs his head in sadness and shame. "Du jour au lendemain Marc s'est trouvé dans la rue comme un pestiféré."<sup>80</sup> Cédric is disgusted by what he hears, and Alain goes on to tell the whole story. He had taken Marc to Thailand to relax a little and forget; there he had randomly contracted acute hepatitis. Cédric's questions turn to Laurent, inquiring about his relationship with Marc. "On était comme deux frères,"<sup>81</sup> Laurent confesses. Concerning both cousins being gay Alain offers, "Marc, il l'a très mal pris. Deux cousins gays, il trouvait ça pas drôle de tout."<sup>82</sup> Laurent interrupts, "Il s'en voulait. Il pensait que tout le monde allait croire que c'était de sa faute et que c'était contagieux."<sup>83</sup> As the conversation continues, they arrive at the problem of Laurent's parents. Laurent recognizes that they will one day know, but he wants them to know Cédric first, to know that he's just a man like all men. He will not come out incautiously, though, because he does not wish to risk losing his family.

Although the dinner restores equanimity to his relationship with Cédric, Laurent is beginning to feel the pressure to come out of the closet in a poignant fashion. Indeed, he

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<sup>78</sup> "What is this story?"

<sup>79</sup> "A true story, alas."

<sup>80</sup> "Just like that Marc found himself in the street like he had the plague."

<sup>81</sup> "We were like two brothers."

<sup>82</sup> "Marc took it poorly. Two gay cousins? He didn't find it funny at all."

<sup>83</sup> "He resented it. He thought that everyone was going to believe that it was his fault and that it was contagious."

recognizes that coming out is a must, and neither Cédric nor Alain will let him forget it. He is blocked in on both sides, and on both sides he faces the potential loss of cherished relationships. It is a difficulty double bind. He has no choice but to move, and his many conflicting relationships will ensure that he does.

#### The Showdown:

Laurent's closet is too multifaceted, too layered to come down without conflict, and indeed, it is on account of these layers that conflict will arise on multiple fronts. The first showdowns will stem from the formal colliding of the two worlds. Laurent does, in fact, bring Cédric to Walincourt to meet his family, but in doing so he brings Carole as well to perpetuate the illusion of his heterosexuality.

The three arrive for a family dinner with all present, and Cédric enchants the lot. He beguiles them with his intelligence and charm. All, indeed, are taken in save Martine whose pain seems to render her more perceptive, more sensitive, even as she medicates to maintain her sangfroid. Cédric dominates the conversation and speaks to the nobility of his profession which, of course, vindicates Laurent's choice of career path for which he has hitherto suffered familial disapproval.

After dinner, the group retires to the living room where Cédric sits in as the center of conversation like a king holding court. The camera shows him surrounded by the family, each making their own impression of him. Cédric is cool and collected. He speaks about his family and late father openly, answering questions about his mother with honesty. When Martine asks

pointedly if he himself is married he deflects cleverly, “Oui, j’ai épousé la science.”<sup>84</sup> Georges jests in response, “C’est pas le cas de mon neveu [...] pas vrai, Carole?”<sup>85</sup> Carole sits at the piano, lazily sounding random keys, segregated from the rest in a sign that she no longer has any place among them. Roused by Georges’ question, though, she responds riskily, “Mais quand on a la chance de rencontrer l’homme de sa vie, on n’a pas envie de passer à côté.”<sup>86</sup> The overtly homosexual overtones are shadowed with resentment, and for the first time Cédric signals the tiniest bit of discomfort as he drags his cigarette with Martine in the background looking at him intently.

Carole’s comment is imprudent, but she has reached the end of her patience. She rises from the piano bench and announces that it is time for her to turn in. “Laurent, tu viens?”<sup>87</sup> she queries. As the party breaks up, Jeanne announces that she has made up the guest room for Cédric, and Carole pushes Laurent in front of her towards the stairs, barking under her breath, “Monte!”<sup>88</sup> Cédric looks on with slight annoyance as Laurent disappears upstairs.

Once in their room Carole quips, “Tu peux me dire ce que je fous là?”<sup>89</sup> She turns on the desk lamp which shines in Laurent’s face like an interrogation lamp. “Ça va durer combien de temps cette comédie? Je suis venue ici avec Cédric pour t’aider, Laurent, pas pour te servir

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<sup>84</sup> “Yes, I married science.”

<sup>85</sup> “It’s not the case with my nephew [...] right, Carole?”

<sup>86</sup> “Well, when you meet the man of your dreams, you don’t want to let the opportunity pass you by.”

<sup>87</sup> “Laurent, you coming?”

<sup>88</sup> “Up!”

<sup>89</sup> “Can you tell me what the fuck I’m doing here?”

d'alibi. En tout cas c'est la dernière fois. Je ne remettrai pas pied ici si tu ne fais rien."<sup>90</sup> Laurent retorts insistently, "Mais, je peux pas, putain, je peux pas."<sup>91</sup> Imperturbed Carole insists, "Alors, va l'expliquer à Cédric." Turning sharply she dismisses, "Bonne nuit."<sup>92</sup> Carole has definitively set her boundary. In withdrawing her support, she delivers a powerful blow to the stability of Laurent's closet. She will no longer serve as his beard. She will not be used. She is there only to support him if he comes out to his parents, i.e., if he risks everything.

Laurent repairs downstairs to the guestroom to take momentary refuge with Cédric who grabs him as he enters, and the two laugh in the moonlight streaming into the dark room. Cédric notes that Carole is tired of her role as beard now that he has taken her place. Laurent jests and moves to kiss him, but Cédric pushes him off. He will not be affectionate with Laurent in this house so long as their relationship is a secret. When Laurent tries to make excuses for avoiding the subject with his parents, Cédric insists lovingly but firmly, "Écoute-moi, Laurent. J'ai pas envie qu'on se tripote sous la table, là, ou entre deux portes. Qu'est-ce qu'ils penseraient s'ils nous surprenaient, hein? Encore des sales pédés qui font leurs saloperies dans les dos des autres, c'est ça? J'ai plus envie d'avoir honte, moi. J'ai pas honte d'être avec toi."<sup>93</sup> He leans into Laurent with a loving yet chaste kiss. He leaves Laurent in the room, taking his leave to return to the nursery. Laurent is left at the window looking out into the night. The light that a moment ago was intimate and warm is now cold and lonely. The two bastions of his closet have

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<sup>90</sup> "How long is this comedy sketch going to last? I came here with Cédric to help you, Laurent, not to serve as your alibi. Regardless, it's the last time. I shall never step foot here again if you do nothing."

<sup>91</sup> "But I can't. Fuck! I can't."

<sup>92</sup> "Then go explain that to Cédric. Good night."

<sup>93</sup> "Listen to me, Laurent. I don't want us to fondle each other under the table or on the sly. What would they think if they caught us, huh? Once again two dirty fags doing the nasty behind our backs, is that it? I don't want to be ashamed anymore. I'm not ashamed to be with you."

now deserted him, she who made it possible and he who made it supportable. The music is slow, dark, and lonely. Laurent is alone.

As the rift between them grows, Cédric becomes exhausted emotionally and leaves for Paris. Emma, unwilling to relive again the trauma of a painful past, takes matters into her own hands. With the prophecy that she would just break through the locked door looming in the background, she leaves for Walincourt.

Arriving at the pharmacy at the hour of opening she requests to speak with Pierre and Jeanne. They retire to the parlor, and Emma finds the courage to begin. Framed in a tight close up of her face she states, “Je crois que nos enfants s’aiment.”<sup>94</sup> The camera pans to Jeanne who is speechless, then to Pierre who is stunned. Breathlessly he asks, “Qu’est-ce que vous voulez dire?”<sup>95</sup> “Ce que vous avez compris,”<sup>96</sup> Emma replies. After a few cautious inquiries aimed at ascertaining the truth, Emma adds with an air of purposefulness, « Mais si je suis là c’est parce qu’ils ont besoin de nous.”<sup>97</sup> Pierre cuts her off before she can launch her campaign, “Je vous raccompagne.”<sup>98</sup> At first Emma looks stunned, unbelieving of the response, but without a word she rises to leave. She hesitates for a moment to look back at Jeanne and then withdraws.

The scene shift finds Laurent sitting in his room, smoking cigarettes and hiding. He can will himself to do nothing. Carole cannot motivate him. He has shut down. When the doorbell

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<sup>94</sup> “I believe our children love each other.”

<sup>95</sup> “What do you mean?”

<sup>96</sup> “What you understood.”

<sup>97</sup> “But if I am here it is because they need us.”

<sup>98</sup> “I’ll see you out.”

rings, she rises to answer hoping it is Cédric. When she opens the door it is not Cédric but Pierre who has rung. He barges in and heads for Laurent's room. Laurent exits his room to meet his father, "Qu'est-ce que tu fais là?" Pierre can find no words, a sign of his shame. His face distorts with emotion, sadness and shame, and he smacks Laurent soundly across the face. He turns to leave. Laurent follows in a panic. Pierre turns, his face contorted in contempt, "Tu me dégoûtes! Vous vous êtes bien foutus de notre gueule, hein?"<sup>99</sup> Standing at the door he throws a sack of Laurent's possessions on the floor and adds, "C'est pas la peine que tu remettes les peids à la maison"<sup>100</sup> at which point he turns on his heel and leaves.

Laurent is left standing in the kitchen with Carole. His face is confused and shocked. He has now suffered the entire upheaval of his closet. He has been forced out against his will. The double bind has been broken. He is discredited. His father holds him in contempt. He has pushed his lover away through his shame. The stage is set for an acute unraveling. Volatile violence is a serious risk. He is at a crossroads. Has he lost everything, or is there room for a new beginning?

#### Shame and Destruction:

Laurent is consumed by emotion. Arriving at the nursery, he runs passed Emma who calls after him. He kicks Cédric's door in and proceeds to destroy the experiments in the lab on which they have been working, months of work destroyed. Emma tries to stop him, but he is crazed. He is yelling out against Cédric, his eyes burning with tears. Emma confesses that it

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<sup>99</sup> "You disgustme! You two really played us, huh?"

<sup>100</sup> "There's no need for you step foot in the house again."

was she who told them, that Cédric knew nothing. Laurent is totally confused, begging why he cries, “Mais, ma mère?! Vous avez pensé à ma mère?!”<sup>101</sup> He runs from the room, leaving Emma stunned.

The frame switches to Jeanne, who is sat at her table in mourning. Behind her stands Pierre gazing out the window. She is flanked by Martine and Georges who sit in silence.

Finally, Martine breaks her tranquilized silence, “Jeanne, tu vas finir comme moi, à avaler toute ta pharmacie.”<sup>102</sup> Georges and Pierre rebuke her, but she insists, “Je peux plus le vivre comme ça. C’est comme nous avons tué notre propre fils.”<sup>103</sup> The men make claims that they must establish minimums of behavior for their children, yet Martine insists, “Jeanne, il y a une question à se poser, une seule question: Est-ce qu’on aime nos enfants autant qu’on prétend?”<sup>104</sup> Jeanne looks up at her, but the men continue to rant, blaming Laurent for his dishonesty and deception, but Martine adds, her eyes still drugged but her voice full of conviction, « Notre faute, c’est nous qui l’avons poussé à mentir, à faire ce qui *nous* faisait plaisir.”<sup>105</sup> Still Pierre does not relent. The threat of shame before what people will say overwhelms him, but Martine rebukes him, “T’occupe pas des gens! On vit pas avec eux mais avec ses enfants. Quand ton fils sera plus là, c’est pas eux qui le remplaceront.”<sup>106</sup> Martine’s words echo Emma’s pronouncement

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<sup>101</sup> “But my mother?! Did you think about my mother?!”

<sup>102</sup> “Jeanne, you’re going to end up like me swallowing your whole pharmacy.”

<sup>103</sup> “I can’t live it out this way any longer. It’s as if we killed our own son.”

<sup>104</sup> “Jeanne, there is one question to ask ourselves, one sole question: Do we love our children as much as we claim?”

<sup>105</sup> “Our fault, It is we who pushed him to lie, to do what would please *us*.”

<sup>106</sup> “Don’t worry about people! We live with our children. When you son is no longer here, it is not they who will replace him.”



concerning Cédric's late father, "C'est toujours quand les gens disparaissent qu'on commence à les comprendre."<sup>107</sup> Martine's breach of silence reveals what has been turning in her head. She had been wrong. She had cared about the wrong things. She had cared for the concerns of the wrong people. Her inner life is one of conviction and loss. She failed her child, and nothing can replace him. No one can fix it. Now Jeanne stands at the same crossroads, and she cannot, will not, stand idly by. She will not keep the wife's good silence. Jeanne must be the mother she failed to be.

The scene is horrible. There is no background music only silence, and the relentless ticking of the clock signaling that time is, indeed, of the essence. Will they act or not? The camera goes from one close up to another registering their shock, registering their pain and shame, but in Martine there is only conviction. The bond that ostracized her son, the same bond that has imprisoned her nephew was their fault. They failed their children. Regardless of their own shame, their own doubts, their own rigid clinging to formal culture, they had chosen the wrong side.

Meanwhile Laurent spins out of control. He drowns his sorrow at the local gay club and wonders pensively through the red-light district. Upon returning to his apartment, he fails at a last attempt at feigned heterosexuality in trying to sleep with Carole who ultimately rebukes him, "Tu es un pédé, Laurent. Alors, assume-toi et arrête de nous emmerder avec tes histoires!"<sup>108</sup> The camera frames them in a bird's eye view as painfully revelatory as Carole's biting, yet

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<sup>107</sup> "It is always when people are gone that we begin to understand them."

<sup>108</sup> "You're a fag, Laurent. So suck it up, and stop bothering us with your problems."

appropriate, pronouncement, “Je suis désolée de te le dire, mais Marc avait plus de courage.”<sup>109</sup>  
Carole’s shame-filled words chase Laurent from the bed.

Naked save for his underwear, Laurent makes his way into the kitchen. It is dark, he moves in the shadow with naught but the light from the street. The music is slow and foreboding. He grips a bottle of Pastisse and begins to chug it down with big gulps, filling himself to the point of disgust. She locks himself in the bathroom. Suddenly the doorbell rings. Carole rises to answer the door. In an unexpected turn of events, it is Emma come to speak with Laurent, who, exiting the bathroom, greets her and then passes out in a bout of much needed alcohol poisoning-drenched comic relief.

The sequence of scenes brings us through the many phases of dissolution which accompany the breakup of a double bind. There is anger, denial, shame, disappointment, mourning, destructive violence, and, hopefully, reasoning. The outcome is always uncertain, and complete annihilation is, indeed, a possibility. However, Laurent, like Eric in *Edge of Seventeen*, benefits from the love of those about him who will do what it takes to love him back from the edge.

Staying:

When Laurent comes to, he is safe at Emma’s house. He is being examined by a doctor who prescribes him medication for his nerves. After recovering from the original shock of being back at Emma’s, he joins her in the kitchen for breakfast. She apologizes for her indiscretion,

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<sup>109</sup> “I’m sorry to tell you, but Marc had more courage.”

and they work it out. Laurent, in spite of everything, gazes at her with loving, happy eyes, grateful for this woman who shows him the reality of her love for him.

The phone rings; it is Jeanne on the other end of the line. Laurent flees the kitchen and refuses to speak with her. Jeanne asks to meet up with Emma, who acquiesces. Together they sit at a café by the station, and Jeanne weeps the tears she needs to weep. Emma assures her, “Quand ça nous tombe dessus nous sommes tous pareils.”<sup>110</sup> She goes on to admit that no matter what she herself may think, she is not willing to lose her son, and she wants above all that he be happy. When they part their ways, Jeanne is still in mourning and resolution has yet to take place, but the seeds have been planted.

At the scene shift, Carole is with Laurent in Cédric’s laboratory. She is amazed of the mess left in the wake of his temper. Laurent confesses that he does not know how she is able to forgive him his bad behavior. She admits, “Oh, tu sais, je t’aime comme tu es. Je crois même que je pourrais pas t’aimer si t’étais autrement, mais ça je l’ai compris un peu tard.”<sup>111</sup>

Laurent confesses to Emma that he is leaving. He is transferring to Paris. He has gone to the head of school and confessed everything, a new sign of courage and self-assertion hitherto uncharacteristic. Nevertheless, Emma has one more play to make. In a maternal bending of the truth, she convinces Cédric to come home. The following morning, right on cue, Cédric comes speeding up to the house. Knowing that he would drop everything at the very thought she were in danger, Emma has told him she needs to have a few tests done at the doctor’s. Of course, Cédric still knows nothing of the misadventure with Laurent’s parents.

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<sup>110</sup> “When this befalls us, we are all the same.”

<sup>111</sup> “Oh you know, I love you as you are. I even think that I couldn’t love you if you were otherwise, but I understood this a bit too late.”

When he discovers that she has lied to him, he is nonplused. When he discovers that she has been to Walincourt, he is amazed, “Putain, mais c’est pas vrai, mais de quel droit t’as fait ça?”<sup>112</sup> She responds with absolute honesty, not as his mother, but as a fellow human being, “Du droit au bonheur. C’est con, hein, mais bon ça existe.”<sup>113</sup> The statement, although seemingly naïve in many ways, sums up the entire problem at hand. The anti-homosexual taboo in no way actually supports heterosexuality save in providing a counter-definition against which to pit itself. To break the homosexual bind is to acknowledge the right of the human being to pursue happiness.

When Cédric rouses Laurent from sleep, Laurent gathers his belongings and flees the room, refusing to meet Cédric’s eyes or to engage in serious conversation. He sets off to leave for his train, but Emma stops him to say good-bye. Cédric catching up to Laurent offers to accompany him to the station.

As the two make their way through the streets in Cédric’s car, Laurent is slouched against the window, his head turned in sadness and shame. Slowly tears begin to strew his cheeks. Finally Cédric can no longer bear to see him cry, and he pulls over to the side of the road. Drawing Laurent into his chest in a comforting embrace, he soothes him. We see them in profile through the car window, then from across the street, then finally inside the car with them, the camera mimicking the sensation of realization, and withdrawing panic, and then finally interior commitment. Cédric, finding words, apologizes for his stubbornness and self-centeredness, but in the end he is reduced to his truth, “Je t’aime. Je t’aime.”<sup>114</sup> At the force of Cédric’s sincerity,

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<sup>112</sup> “Fuck, you’ve got to be kidding me. What right did you have to do that?”

<sup>113</sup> “The right to happiness. It sounds stupid, but, good enough, it exists.”

<sup>114</sup> “I love you. I love you.”

Laurent takes a deep breath and calms; he lifts his head, and red-eyed, exhausted yet resolute, he requests, “Amène-moi à Walincourt.”<sup>115</sup>

Arriving at the pharmacy in Walincourt, Laurent bids Cédric come with him, an acknowledgment that their place is at each other’s side. They enter the store and make their way past the clients, standing boldly before his parents at the counter. “Bon, je m’en fous que veuillez plus me voir. Moi, j’ai pas envie de vous perdre.”<sup>116</sup> The determination in his voice is firm. Although at first he does not make eye contact, in the utterance he finds his courage and makes fixed eye contact. Laurent’s face fills the entire screen with Cédric close behind him. The shot emphasizes his decisiveness and strength.

His father, Pierre, in keeping with his personality, asks if they can continue their conversation in private. Of course, the move reinforces his shame and embarrassment, yet he is offering to continue the conversation. The two enter into the house. They struggle to find a place to begin, both indirectly asking to be respected. Laurent, however, finally lays it out on the table, “Tu connais Cédric. Mais, j’suis amoureux de lui.”<sup>117</sup> At his own confession Laurent lowers his head for the first time not in the painful shame of rejection but with a lover’s blush, “Ouais, je l’aime,”<sup>118</sup> he half clucks with the subtle grin of one delighting in what is. Then coming back from his reverie he insists, “Oui, j’aime un mec et je sais que tu peux pas le supporter mais c’est comme ça. C’est pas une question d’être pédé ou quoi; c’est juste une

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<sup>115</sup> “Take me to Walincourt.”

<sup>116</sup> “Listen, I don’t care if you don’t want to see me anymore. I don’t want to lose you.”

<sup>117</sup> “You know Cédric. Well, I’m in love with him.”

<sup>118</sup> “Yeah, I love him”

question d'amour."<sup>119</sup> At the sound of the word *pédé*, i.e., fag, Pierre hangs his head, but Laurent does not falter. The camera focuses in on Pierre's chagrin, but Laurent moves closer to comfort him, "Bon, papa, c'est pas de ta faute; c'est pas de la mienne non plus. T'y es pour rien et moi non plus."<sup>120</sup> He clenches his hand down on his father's shoulder in a sign of reassurance and support. His father does not make a move toward him, yet neither does he move away. "S'il te plait," Pierre pleads in hushed tones, "laisse-moi encore un peu de temps."

Jeanne enters from the shop, and the camera frames her in the center of the shot, filling the frame, looking at these her men with eyes full of trepidation and, perhaps, a little hope. The camera shifts to see Pierre and Laurent through her eyes; they are framed in the doorway to the dining room, the shot closed, the promise of home. There is no miracle moment of sudden, dawning acceptance, but neither is the house broken.

The scene shifts to a forest canopy, the camera looking up to the trees. The music is happy and bright. "Ah, putain, je me sens léger, là!"<sup>121</sup> With his words the camera descends the long trunks to settle on Cédric and Laurent in a two-shot. The two exchange cheerful banter, laughing about their respective parents and delighting in their freedom. Cédric wraps his arms around Laurent in an embrace that is half mock wrestling move, and the two gaze up at the canopy, the camera following suit; they spin and spin in their happiness, the camera treating us to a joyfully empathetic bout of dizziness, descending once again to freeze on them in a playful embrace of delight as the credits roll.

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<sup>119</sup> "Yes, I love a guy, and I know that you can't stand it, but that's the way it is. It's not a question of being a fag or what have you. It's just a question of love."

<sup>120</sup> Hey, Dad, it's not your fault, nor is it mine. You're not to blame and neither am I."

<sup>121</sup> "Damn, I feel light!"

*Juste une question d'amour* drags us through the bowels of the closet. It brings us to the bind and to the double bind. It masterfully portrays the many levels of shame that affect all those implicated in the creation and maintenance of the closeted life, both the victims and the perpetrators of the bind. We witness their vacillations as they encounter the force of the formal culture that controls them and see them struggle through the ramifications of maintaining and grappling with the formal force.

Ultimately we see, though, that the key to breaking the hold of the bind is in the staying. Conforming to the bind perpetuates it indefinitely. Fleeing the bind removes the sufferer from the immediate threat yet preserves the bind intact, rendering the escapee fugitive and exiled. The bind is broken when the bound person refuses the bind but also denies it its power. In staying and demanding the love and respect that the bind would so utterly compromise, the gay person vindicates the right to happiness.

## Chapter VII: The Hidden Closet

The taboo against homosexuality is, and has been since time immemorial, reinforced by the combined agency of religious injunction and heteronormativity. That both formal culture and informal culture enforce the standard render it a moral as well as an unconscious cultural drama for perceived sexual normalcy. When the rules of the game are broken by the other, homophobia flares in the form of the anticontamination script contempt such that the impulse is to expel the contaminant. It is a reactive, panic-based script in which the violence begins immediately through the very expression of the affect.

When the culturally assimilated rules are transgressed by the self, the priorly internalized force of homophobia pits the self against the self, communicating to one's very psyche an endless diatribe of contemptuous scorn. As the fact of one's homosexuality is perceived, defensive measures ensue in order to shield the self from the expected retribution of a homophobic culture. Sexuality being such a ubiquitous element in human culture becomes ever more difficult to avoid be it in act, thought, perception, or communication. The closet, a contrived network of protective lies and omissions of truth, is developed in order to create a more pleasing public persona. It is further strengthened via the adoption of various defensive scripts which divert external attention away from one's sexuality such that it is more able to pass unnoticed. The whole is reinforced by an inner dialogue of internalized homophobia which justifies the deception as a necessary evil in order to avoid the presumably inevitable encounter with colossal and potentially catastrophic inter and intrapersonal shame.



The closeted individual remains discreditable. His or her primary social effort is to deflect attention away from the castigatory stigma. If his social relations believe, or at least accept, the social persona, the closet exerts a binding force upon the discreditable individual. The maintenance of the bind is restrictive of social expression and mobility, yet it establishes a safe-zone, temporarily at least, from the threat of exposure. As time passes, one's interpersonal relationships become ever more enmeshed and dependent on the prevaricatory mask.

In *Doña Herlinda y su Hijo*, we see the workings of a powerful and rigid closet. We learn that it begins in Rodolfo's adolescence in which fellow classmates sleeping over is tacitly tolerated so long as formal impressions of correctness are maintained. As Rodolfo and Ramón live out their relationship, it is kept secret, or at least unspoken, with the notable exception of Billy, Ramón's friend and confidant. In order to maintain both relationship and closeted status, their social mobility becomes ever more constricted until they end living all together: mother and son with gay lover, wife, and child. All, save Ramón, are distinctly dependent upon Rodolfo's maintenance of his closet. Ramón, in order not to lose his relationship with Rodolfo, is bound to accept his role, he with no other consolation save his music and his studio in the tower at the heart of the bind.

For the bound individual, the threat of a whistle-blower looms large in what would be otherwise banal social interactions. However, the double bind presents a particular danger insofar as it constitutes an unavoidable catch-22 of shame. The double bind is a guarantee of loss; if it does not simply lead to a sort of closet implosion, it will at least require the choice of denying one-side or the other of the bind. At any rate, it will herald the advent of poignant shame.

In *Edge of Seventeen*, the double bind originates from within. Exteriorly Eric is required to maintain the feigned romantic nature, or at least possibility, of his relationship with Maggie. He is a model son and promising musician destined for university. His critical encounter, though, with Angie and Rod initiates a quest for self in which Eric, a gay senior in high school, begins to manifest a powerful need to express his sexuality both in social spheres and in his physical appearance. As this newly emergent expression begins to overtake his closeted tameness ever more completely, maintenance of a closeted identity becomes nigh impossible, for his most important relationships are unwilling to feign blindness to the transformation and the probable social information it communicates. On the one hand, he feels a compelling need to express the colorful nature of his decidedly gay personality which can only be squelched with substantial trauma to his sense of self; on the other hand, this very expression renders him unacceptable to his hitherto depended on relationships. Felicitously, in the face of an inevitable decision, Eric chooses himself over his relationships and the exigencies of the bind. Although the choice costs him his family and closest friendships, he finds new freedom in the gay community which accepts him as he is.

In *Juste une question d'amour*, the force of the double bind comes from without. Laurent is willing, if not content, to maintain the appearance of heteronormativity indefinitely. Painfully traumatized via the family response to his cousin Marc's homosexuality, he is unwilling to risk the same fate of utter rejection. When, however, he meets Cédric and subsequently Cédric's mother Emma, Laurent blooms in the security of his new relationships. The stability of their affection provides a platform for him to be and feel himself. Difficultly, however, it also demands that he carefully compartmentalize his relationships if he is to avoid the collision of two antithetical social personas. When Cédric demands that he choose, it forces Laurent to face the

specter of potent loss either of the family whom he cherishes or the man with whom he is in love. The situation is devastating and untenable. The reality of loss is unavoidable.

The closet, however, is not one-sided; it does not uniquely concern the homosexual. The maintenance or failure of the closet has important ramifications for those who have come to depend on the closeted charade. Indeed, upon analysis, one comes to understand that juxtaposed to the gay closet is a parental closet of grave consequence.

On the long list of ideals and taboos which form the meat of formal culture is the ideal and exigency that parents love their children with a powerful, perhaps unconditional, love. Thus, in a homophobic, heterosexist, religiously bound culture, the illusion of heteronormativity and the steadfastness of parental love are diametrically opposed. The contempt inherent to homophobia is inimical to love. That a majority of children are born heterosexual saves the concomitant proportion of parents from ever having to confront the challenge of discovering which they cleave to more strongly: their children or their enculturated heterosexism. To the parent of the gay child, however, nature shows no such kindness. To knowingly have, then, a gay child in a homophobic culture is to be forced to choose: either to align one's self with one's culture or with one's child.

Ironically, both exigencies originate in formal culture, and both are supported by informal culture. Both represent potent ideals and, in failure, shameful taboos. It happens, then, in a culture where heteronormativity and demands for steadfastness in parental love coincide, the parent of a discredited gay child finds himself or herself caught in the throes of an excruciating double bind. It forces a question of dire consequence put forth so succinctly by Martine : “[...] il y a une question à se poser, une seule question: Est-ce qu'on aime nos enfants autant qu'on

prétend?”<sup>122</sup> Here there is no escape from shame; the question is only which shame will one suffer.

Doña Herlinda is buffered from being forced to confront this double bind, at least publicly, insofar as her son maintains his closet—primarily for her benefit. Rodolfo’s remaining in the closet shields her from ever having to cede the rose-colored façade in which her son’s closeted public drama allows her to indulge. In making herself endearing and central to their lives, she ensures that her demands on the sexual representation of Rodolfo and Ramón are not met with censuring hostility. She showers them both with extravagant affection and indulgence. Her social performance is unimpeachable; she is gracious in all matters. There is but one limpid moment, however, when we witness the truth of her intention and her values. When Doña Herlinda and Rodolfo return from the celebration of his engagement to Olga, Rodolfo finds Ramón drunk on tequila, sobbing in their bed. The high-angle shot enhances how we see him as broken and vulnerable. When Rodolfo sits down beside him, Ramón buries his face in a pillow, a sign of poignant shame, a bid for invisibility. When Rodolfo finally pulls the pillow from his face and forces Ramón to look into his eyes, Ramón throws himself into Rodolfo’s arms and weeps. On the other side of the wall, Doña Herlinda lies in her bed, the space where we, the spectators, are allowed to see her backstage truths and motivations. The spot light of her lamp on the table beside her bed glimmers in her perfect eyeshadow and illumines her plush, comfortable bed with cheerful, floral sheets. She wears a purple negligée, a colorful sign of her station, removing her from the unsightly drama of the too honest emotion heard on the other side of her wall. We see her straight on, at a distance; we observe her reaction. Her face is without affect, without regret, without remorse. She listens to the pain being felt and does nothing. Hers

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<sup>122</sup> “[...] there is one question to ask ourselves, one sole question: Do we love our children as much as we claim?”

is a position of privilege and relational power. She will not mire her performance with such willing scapegoats right at hand. The sole kinesic expression of even the faintest affect is revealed by the almost imperceptible wringing of her hands in a sign of distress, but one is not sure whether she is responding empathetically to Ramón sobbing or hoping that Rodolfo will not give in and force her to face her own bind, namely, that she cares more for her dream of a heteronormative family than she does for the fact of her son's suffering and that of the man bound to him to whom she so saccharinely refers as a member of the family. She, too, is bound; she cannot have Rodolfo and Olga without Rodolfo and Ramón, yet their willingness to monitor themselves frees her from having to face the painful shame of the double bind she would undoubtedly incur should Rodolfo come out of the closet.

The mother in *Edge of Seventeen* is not so lucky. For all of the social risk and inner confusion, Eric delights in the person he is becoming. In spite of the painful shame with which his new public persona is greeted by the heterosexist community about him, he is happy about it. It is exciting for him. He loves the colors and the stylish flare; he loves the music and the dancing he encounters at the heart of his newfound cultural home. Men excite him, and he wants to be excited by them. Indeed, his new personal clarity leads to dreaming big dreams and possibilities for his emerging self. He can cope with the rejection of peers, for he finds great comfort and enjoyment in the friendship of his new friends where he no longer feels odd but rather front stage and trendy. Although he truly laments the loss of Maggie, for whom he can never be that which she longs for him to be, he is riveted by the new found Johnathan and the promise of their future potential.

Nevertheless, he is deeply anguished by the threat of the loss of his parents. Caught in a double bind, he refuses to suffocate himself, and after quiet consideration, he comes out to his

mother. Suspecting her son's homosexuality, she has already proven herself invasive of his privacy, angry, judgmental, hostile, and possessed of an overtly conditional love; still he hopes. She refuses to look at her son even when teary-eyed and short of breath he begs her to do so; indeed, she only turns her shoulder to him even more sharply. When he confesses to being gay, she turns belaboredly and manages a breathless, "I know." Standing to embrace him, as we brace for the moment that she will prove she loves him more than she is concerned for the heteronormative expectation of her culture, she moans plaintively, "Oh, little boy, what did I do wrong?" The interpersonal bridge between them collapses. Too cowardly to face the disintegration of her formal ideals, she labels her son error and assumes instead the shame-ridden identity of failed mother sustained, of course, by the specter of her son, a sexual failure. Regaining her composure she withdraws from his embrace. Winded and speechless, she turns from him and walks away. Pleadingly, Eric calls after her, and in one last moment she admits with childish defeat, "I don't know how to handle this." Again she turns to leave. Eric calls to her, "Mom, I love you." She but looks upon him with sadness and shame and nods some wordless, undiscernible and unassuring response. With finality she turns and leaves the room.

As Eric stands there deserted in a full-front close up, his tear-filled eyes tracing the air around him for some sort of meaning, we feel his utter dejectedness and the weight of his mother's abandonment. She is riddled with shame and pitiful, for she comes from a culture that has set her up to suffer profoundly. Yet the spectator, gazing into her son's broken mien, does not forget that she is still mother, and she has renounced her child because she is a coward. She refuses to encounter alongside her son the shame that he must now face alone.

*Juste une question d'amour* brings us through three different parental encounters with homosexual taboo. The first is the wake of the disaster that was Georges and Martine's

expulsion of their son Marc. He is dead, and they did not even stand beside him in his dying. So convinced were they that he was deserving of contemptuous scorn that, when they heard that he had but days to live, they immediately assumed it was AIDS and forsook him, accepting the ailment as just retribution for his disgusting sexuality. Against this backdrop we see them traumatized, their marriage suffering, Georges in full denial, and Martine swallowing an endless chain of pills to stop the anxiety of shame and guilt. Unforgiven and unforgivable, Martine finally breaks, “Je peux plus le vivre comme ça. C’est comme nous avons tué notre propre fils.”<sup>123</sup>

As Martine finally confesses her guilt, Jeanne and Pierre wallow in their own shame, having recently expelled Laurent. At her confession, Pierre swiftly retorts, “Martine, tu n’y es pour rien! On peut pas tout accepter même si c’est nos enfants.”<sup>124</sup> At face value, his comment is meant to assuage her suffering, but there is more than a little self-interest in his consolation. In exonerating her, he exonerates himself, for if she can be blamed, he too is guilty. Pierre and Jeanne cling to their formal reassurances, but Martine warns, “T’occupe pas des gens! On vit pas avec eux mais avec ses enfants. Quand ton fils sera plus là, c’est pas eux qui le remplaceront.”<sup>125</sup> The spotlight of her pronouncement denudes the mendacious choice.

Later Jeanne, perhaps spurred on by Martine’s honest assumption of failure as a mother, arranges to meet with Emma who quickly censures her with the full impact of formal shame, “Jeanne, comment peut-on mettre son enfant à la porte simplement parce qu’il est un peu

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<sup>123</sup> “I can’t live it out this way any longer. It’s as if we killed our own son.”

<sup>124</sup> “Martine, it’s not your fault. We cannot accept everything even if it’s for our children.”

<sup>125</sup> “Don’t worry about people! We live with our children. When your son is no longer here, it is not they who will replace him.”

différent?”<sup>126</sup> At her words, spoken without rancor but laden with formal censure, Jeanne breaks into weeping with shame, her head bowed, her shoulder drawn in as if to hide from the eyes that see.

Yet, Emma does not try to dissimulate that she has suffered much in accepting her son's homosexuality. Indeed, she confesses her own struggle against the heterosexist assumption, “Moi aussi, j'en ai versé de larmes Jeanne. Moi aussi, je me voyais en mamie gateaux avec de petits-enfants autour de moi [...] quand ça nous tombe dessus nous sommes tous pareils. Moi, j'ai accepté parce que je ne voulais pas perdre mon fils, et quoique je pense au fond de moi, je veux qu'ils soient heureux.”<sup>127</sup> Here Emma reveals how she walked so lucidly into the storm of shame which surrounds the parent who must cede the heteronormative assumption he or she has been enculturated to bear. She understood two rather straightforward things: firstly she did not want to lose her son; secondly she hoped above all for his happiness. Is it too much to assume that she chose the better part? Before her, Jeanne beholds two examples. Martine chose to uphold the homosexual taboo and reject her son, receiving nothing for her pain. Emma walked into the shame of countering homosexual taboo and, in so doing, retained a son, their relationship, and his affection, and earned a confession from her future son-in-law, “Finalement, j'aurais préféré avoir une mère comme vous, je crois.”<sup>128</sup>

The family and marriage, as the basic human social unit, indeed, holds a place of heightened value among our relationships, for they are our first relationships. They are our

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<sup>126</sup> “Jeanne, how can you kick your child out simply because he is a little different?”

<sup>127</sup> “I, too, shed tears over it. I, too, saw myself as the indulgent grammy with grandchildren about me [...] when this befalls us we are all the same. I accepted it because I didn't want to lose my son, and whatever I feel deep down inside, I want them to be happy.”

<sup>128</sup> “In the end, I would have preferred to have a mother like you, I think.”



sanctum, the place where we come to understand the world, the place where the precepts of formal culture are learned, the place where not only our body but also our ego is born. Family is enshrined because family is precious. It is the first and final statement of validation.

The vast majority of children generally, and gay children specifically, are born to heterosexual couples. Perhaps there is something of the inevitable to the heteronormative assumption. Of course it can be mitigated; new formal precepts, fueled by contemporary, progressive technical understandings, can be communicated as a child grows such that he or she replace, or at least counter, the effects of heterosexism. For those interested in maintaining ties with traditional, mainstream religions, most have communities that have now embraced contemporary, positive understandings concerning homosexuality. It seems that with every passing year, progress is made toward the liberation begun at Stonewall.

Film and literature have done, and continue to do, much to provide for the gay child, especially for the one without homosexual role models at home or in the community, a condition which also seems to be waning, at least in regions where education and knowledge are prized above unquestioning adhesion to formal culture. In a heteronormative culture, movies and literature give us the images to which we can most closely relate: “Gay men and lesbians are fascinated with each other’s coming out stories, as different as they are, because through these stories we are able to identify with others who have lived parallel lives thereby see more deeply into ourselves. As Paul Monette writes, ‘I still shiver with a kind of astonished delight when a gay brother or sister tells of the narrow escape from the closet’” (Kaufman 107).

The closet is, indeed, a trap, a bind of awful proportions from which one must escape if one is to have any chance of personal psychological freedom. Sexuality is so very interlaced

within the fabric of our lives that little remains unscathed by the bind's shameful silence. Sitting at the core of the gay closet, among the emotional chaos and conflicting societal messages which burn the psyche of the gay child, stands the terrible question: Do my parents love me as much as they claim to? The courage Laurent musters when he brings Cédric to his parents' pharmacy is a retelling of a tale many of us can recount in one form or another. It is the moment we refuse to kowtow any longer to the imposed silence of the closet or accept an exile such that our parents will not have to admit that their child is gay. It is when we realize that we no longer want to hide and when we acknowledge that the love of our family is something upon which we depend and which we are loath to lose. It is a formidable moment, one in the aftermath of which we echo Laurent's joyful exclamation, "Ah, putain, je me sens léger, là!"<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> "Damn, I feel light!"

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